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Negotiating a Holistic View of Play-Based Learning: A Commentary

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Introduction

Play is often thought of as the primary occupation of children and its potential for learning and development has been explored in research for decades. The concept of play-based learning has reinvigorated this interest in play, by placing play in the centre of children's learning. Despite the potential presented by play-based learning, this pedagogy is challenging to implement given its broad definitions and differential implementation in children's lives and their learning settings. The eight papers in this chapter present these diverse and important views on play-based learning and its role in children's development. Taken together they demonstrate the varying possibilities of play-based learning and when implemented in concert, the varying recommendations of these contributions present a promising learning context for children.

However, the challenge researchers and educators continue to face in the implementation of this promising pedagogy is the divisiveness of the research recommendations that are based on projects focused on small components, ignoring the benefits and challenges of other conceptions and understandings of play. Amongst the pieces published in this chapter, there is agreement

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that play-based learning provides more developmentally appropriate learning opportunities than adult-directed instruction. However, the differing foci of these pieces results in conflicting information that mirrors those in the extant research. As such, we must consider the connections between the recommendations in these contributions, rather than their contradictions.

Research and Conclusions

Research currently paints opposing pictures of practice. There is ample research that addresses the role of play in generalized child development, including social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. This body of research typically recommends child-directed sociodramatic play as essential to this development. This type of recommendation is reflected in the contribution by Berk who describes the importance of children's imaginary play to support the development of children's self-regulation. A position that is well supported by research.[1] Daubert et al. further explicate the importance of this type of play through their passionate plea for the inclusion of play in children's lives in the face of American educational policies that are removing play to make time for more rigorous academic learning.[2] Their position concerning the role of sociodramatic play in the development of social skills is important and I certainly support the inclusion of child-directed sociodramatic play in settings that are responsible for the care and education of our children. Their plea resonates. However, their description of play as a child-directed practice that is "just pretend" oversimplifies the complex nature of play and minimizes the learning potential of this multifaceted activity. Research that embraces broader conceptions of play-based learning acknowledges the many types of play that children can learn from when this pedagogy is embraced, not simply sociodramatic play.[3] Further, the learning goals in the early years are not strictly developmental in nature. Academic learning is now at the forefront of many early years programs globally and play-based learning has the potential to support these skills in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Hassinger-Das et al. address this academic side of play-based learning in their description of the role of play in mathematical development.[4] They do not define play as strictly child-directed and imaginative, instead they describe the playing of purposefully created games and the role of the educator in extending the academic learning potential through guided play. This recommendation for the inclusion of guided play in educational settings is clearly articulated by Weisberg et al., whose piece explicitly describes the need for a balance between child-directed and adult-directed learning opportunities, with play that is facilitated by thoughtful and knowledgeable adults as a prime example of this balance.[5] The existing research about guided

play frames this type of play as ideal for children's academic learning, as it blends the developmentally appropriate practice of play with the academic learning that is prescribed by the outcomes-based curricula that are common place in North American schools.[6] This inclusion of academics in the early years is always accompanied by a call to ensure that academic learning does not dominate research and educational settings that Berk and Bergen both thoughtfully express in their contributions.[7,8] This is an essential consideration. Just as above I argued against the strict focus on developmental learning goals, here too we must acknowledge that the learning of academic content is not enough. As Danniels et al. and DeLuca clearly state, early learning settings must find a balance between the developmental learning that is crucial during the early years of a child's life and the academic learning that builds the foundation for later scholastic achievement.[9,10] It is expanding our understanding of the appropriate balance that is key to the implementation of productive play-based learning pedagogy. The contributions of all the authors are further demonstration of both how much we have learned about the value of play-based learning and how little we know about how to negotiate this balance.

In much of the research, the debates surrounding the implementation of play-based learning address the argument for or against academic learning in early years settings. However, as research about play evolves, evidence emerges that these seemingly dichotomous goals of development and academic learning can coexist within the realm of play-based learning.[3] The goal of determining a productive balance, however, is not restricted to the integration of academic learning in the early years. But researchers, policy makers, and practitioners also must consider the tools that children use in their play. For instance, in their call against the reduction of play in children's lives, Daubert et al. cite technology as a barrier to play.[2] However, Edwards' thoughtful contribution concerning digital play describes the connection between play and the digital world, rather than their opposition.[11] While the video games of prior times may have involved sitting on a couch using a controller to manipulate a character who performed menial tasks such as jumping from block to block, today's digital world is rife with learning opportunities. In fact, digital technology plays an essential role in modern day problem solving, communication, and much more,[12] not to mention the essential role that technology will undoubtedly play in most children's adult lives, both personally and professionally. This type of debate paints a clear picture of the need to acknowledge the learning values and challenges presented by each type of play. Sociodramatic play provides the ideal environment in which to develop social, emotional, physical, and self-regulatory skills, but it is not an ideal environment for academic learning.[13] Teacher guided play provides the ideal environment for academic

learning, but it is not ideal for the development of social and emotional skills,[13] Digital play provides the opportunity to play with the technology that will be essential to many children's professional success, but it does not provide the opportunity to develop many of the physical skills that are essential to healthy development.[11] Each of these types of play offers both advantages and challenges, but in combination they provide the type of pedagogy that is necessary for holistic child development and learning.

Implications for Development and Policy

There are disagreements in the research and in policy over how children learn best. In the realm of play-based learning, these disagreements largely surround the type of play opportunities that we should provide for young children.[13] However, rather than dwelling on these conflicts and allowing them to cloud our conceptions of play, we need to examine the connections between these perspectives. If we are truly focussed on what children need to succeed in tomorrow's world then we cannot simply advocate for one approach to play over another; instead research needs to determine a productive and developmentally appropriate balance.[3] To accomplish this monumental task, we need research that exists in the middle, determining how a balance can be enacted in classroom settings. We also need policy makers who see the value of more than just academic outcomes.

One barrier to researching a balanced approach to play-based learning is the methodological issues surrounding research about play-based learning.[14] Bergen thoroughly describes these methodological challenges in her contribution.[8] However, it should be added that laboratory-based studies that involve using play to help children acquire a skill that is typically academic in nature, may not accurately reflect the complexities of a classroom setting. In classrooms, there are conflicting demands on a teacher's time including many children with differing abilities. Researchers who work in classrooms and other learning settings can contribute to a solution by presenting data that show both the benefits of play-based pedagogies to student outcomes and also how practitioners are negotiating the balance of time and learning goals. However, this is not the sole challenge faced by practitioners.

Bergen identifies the differential manner in which practitioners are also defining and thus enacting play-based learning.[8] Research has identified the practitioner perspectives that interfere with the broader implementation of play-based learning. These include educators whose perspectives about play are limited to the developmental benefits of play but fail to

consider the academic learning opportunities that are also presented. Educators who hold this perspective implement child-directed free play without considering the role of the educator in extending the learning potential of this play and creating playful learning opportunities for children.[3] These limiting definitions and perspectives of play result in the need to communicate information about the appropriate balance.

Practitioners need to be taught and curricula need to embrace the broad reaching implications of play-based learning. They also need to be presented with encompassing, rather than divisive, definitions of play-based learning. Broad descriptions of play should be accompanied by descriptions of diverse methods for implementing play in the learning environment in order to support both developmental and academic learning goals.[3] One challenge to this implementation comes due to our current educational climate, where the emphasis is placed on the use of assessment to ensure that children are meeting the expectations and standards laid out in standardized curricula.[15] As Bergen states: "play usually involves child-initiated types of learning that are not easily quantified and, thus, adults are often unclear about how to provide such opportunities and evaluate the learning that occurs during extended and rich play experiences.[8] " Thus, as DeLuca so aptly states, assessment practices and policies must be developed that support play-based learning.[10] Play is a developmentally appropriate approach to learning because it allows children to develop and demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a hands-on, child centered manner. As this is the environment where children do their best learning, it is an environment where we should focus on assessing student learning and development. Traditional standardized tools may not allow for assessment of children in play-based contexts, requiring both research and policy to examine and determine approaches that are viable and that allow for the holistic assessment of learning and development in play-based contexts.

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