ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

[Archived] Curriculum and Play in Early Child Development

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Introduction

The need to integrate play into early childhood curriculum has been supported by decades of child development research and is reflected in the most recent documents of such professional organizations as National Association for the Education of Young Children[1,2] and National Research Council.[3,4] However, the specific aspects of the relationship between play and curriculum remain open to interpretation which affects the beliefs of Early Childhood practitioners as well as their classroom practices.

Subject

One of the reasons for the existence of many interpretations is the apparent contradiction between the meaning of the words “play” and “curriculum” prevalent both in professional literature and in everyday language used by teachers and parents of young children: the former has been typically thought of as a spontaneous child-initiated activity that does not serve any

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practical need[5] while the latter has been associated with intentional teaching designed to accomplish clear instructional objectives.[6] Furthermore, play is not a singular construct but rather a continuum of playful behaviours that children engage in the context of Early Childhood classrooms, encompassing a set of behaviours that vary in terms of the degree of adult guidance and support.[7]

Research Context and Recent Research Results

Research on play in the context of Early Childhood Education has addressed two aspects of the play-curriculum relationship. One set of researchers look into the use of play elements, play environments, or play motivation as a way to enhance instruction in core subjects such as literacy,[8,9] mathematics[10,11] or science,[12] or as a way to promote specific areas of development such as the development of children's social-emotional competencies,[13] oral language[14,15] or gross and fine motor skills,[16] etc. These studies are primarily focused on the respective academic domain or area of development with play viewed as a means to foster child development in these domains. When communicated to Early Childhood educators, results of these studies are translated into practical suggestions on how to create math- or literacy-rich play environments and on how to incorporate math, science or literacy language into children's play.[17]

At the same time, there is a long standing tradition in play research that focuses on play itself in its multiple forms (e.g., social, pretend or object), recognizing it as a distinct child-initiated activity with its own unique contributions to child development. These contributions are associated with the development of broader competencies such as theory of mind,[18] symbolic representation,[19] and self-regulation[20] that not only affect child development in early years but have long lasting effect in the school years and beyond. Traditionally, the majority of studies from this perspective have been done in naturalistic settings with children engaged in free play with little or no adult guidance. Recommendations for the curriculum emphasize the provision of adequate physical spaces and props to support play as well as the need to allow ample time for children's free play in the preschool daily schedule and preserve or increase recess time for kindergartners and children in the primary grades.[21,22]

Key Research Questions and Research Gaps

One of the areas that deserve further investigation is the relationship between the quality of play and children's learning and developmental outcomes. It is becoming clear that not all play is

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created equal and that when older preschoolers are engaged in the kind of play that is more typical for toddlers they may not acquire the full benefits usually associated with play.[23,24] Questions remain about what the specific characteristics of “mature” or “fully developed” play are for different ages and what kind of metric or metrics can be used to measure different types/levels of play in different activities. Are the skills learned in block play for example, the same as what is learned from make-believe play? Should these be measured in different ways?

Related to this is the scarcity of research on instructional strategies designed to support play so it will reach its most mature level. The idea that we need to teach young children how to play is not a new one; until recently, however, it has been primarily discussed in terms of enhancing or facilitating play that has already reached a certain level of development[25] with explicit play instruction limited to the context of special education.[26] While children with language delays or emotional disorders have been long thought to benefit from play interventions,[27] typically developing children are usually expected to develop play skills on their own. This approach, while valid in the past, may no longer be sufficient because of dramatic changes in the culture of childhood[28,29,30,31,32,33] have resulted in a situation where an early childhood classroom may be the only place where many children have the opportunity to learn how to play.[34]

Another question that remains unanswered is about the latent long-term consequences of children’s engagement or non-engagement in play of varying types and quality. While some longitudinal data are available about the effects of play-based and non play-based early childhood programs,[35] these studies do not always contain enough specificity about the nature of play in these programs or of the range of levels of play observed across participating children. At the same time, the majority of studies linking play to specific academic or social-emotional competencies focus on short-term outcomes which may underestimate the importance of play in developing broader range of competencies that may not be fully assessed until later. This becomes especially critical in evaluating the effects of play on developing “surface” vs. “deep level” skills since the former may be more easily affected by non-play interventions which may potentially contribute to replacing play in early childhood curriculum with non-play instructional strategies with a narrow academic focus.

Conclusions and Implications

Most researchers independent of their philosophical orientation seem to agree that including play in early childhood curriculum is a necessary condition for ensuring optimal growth and

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development of young children. However, the lack of common definition of play makes it hard to provide specific recommendations for curriculum designers and to advocate for preserving play in early childhood classrooms in the face of increasing demands for a focus on academic skills. One way to solve this dilemma is to use more specific terms like “playful learning” to make a distinction between child-initiated play and adult-initiated activities that make use of play elements in one form or another. This may help to avoid confusions that lead to certain curricula to be labeled as “play-based” when in reality they leave no time for children to initiate play on their own. However, the distinction between play and playful learning has to be made clear both in the description of their objectives and the specific pedagogies associated with each of them. In addition, this also calls for more in-depth analysis of how exactly play elements are used in instruction and whether their use is perceived as “playful” by children themselves or only by the teachers.

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