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Play: Commenting on Smith & Pellegrini, Christie & Roskos, Samuelsson & Pramling, Baumer, Hart & Tannock, Gosso & Carvalho, Clark, and Jenvey

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Introduction

Increasing attention to play during the early years is witnessed both in results from scientific studies and in the uses made of the findings by service providers and policy-makers. Disciplined inquiry into play is extensive across many important and relevant topics such as found in the papers in this chapter,[1-8] even as the depth and quality of evidence and understanding varies considerably. Moreover, how research on play is used in practical settings like school classrooms, playgrounds, nature and community centers, children's libraries and museums, hospital playrooms, and child guidance centers is complicated by different agendas, constraints,

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world views and conceptual frameworks among researchers, practitioners and policy-makers.[9]

The challenges of studying, advocating and using play in the field of early childhood development and education (ECDE) are further compounded by internal and external factors. Internally, with methodological and theoretical advances producing ever more answers to research questions and additions to the knowledge base, we see new research questions and the truth of the adage "the more you know, the more you realize what you don't know." Externally, the targets and needs for play research and application are made greater given the quickened pace of social, educational and technological changes, brought on by the digital revolution, global climate change, shifting demographics, and economic and political changes.

The field of ECDE has a long tradition of play-related theorizing, research and practice. The eight papers[1-8] in this chapter reinforce and extend the meaning and utility of widely accepted propositions that play is a major occupation[10] (as opposed to work or business) of young children (with the caveat that the play "umbrella" includes exploration, imitation, narration, investigation, imagination, and, meta-play planning and negotiation along with play enactments). Play expression can take on many different forms by combining the four "play elements" of (1) body, (2) object, (3) symbol use and (4) relationships; play is associated with the being and becoming of the wholechild --characterized by different but interrelated developmental dimensions/domains (e.g., emotional, social, physical, cognitive, linguistic, spiritual and moral), and that play actions and thoughts of young children are connectable to micro- and macro-contextual factors.[11]

The papers in this chapter are diverse and do not yield to a simple unifying theme. Still, as a composite they relate to the above propositions within the literature and to the broader issues mentioned earlier. Furthermore, these research summaries together suggest three important considerations: (1) What is "quality" play and how to evaluate it in young children? (2) What is the role of the adult (i.e., teacher, parent, therapist, etc.) in ECDE play?; and (3) How differentiated are adult play beliefs and practices as children mature from birth to eight or nine years?

Research and Conclusions

The contributions in this chapter1-8 define and describe play and its attributes and summarize literature within four areas: (1) Play and learning/development; (2) Play and teaching; (3) Cultural context; and (4) Play interventions.

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Play reflects, reinforces, or generates new learning and development.[11] As Smith and Pellegrini[1] discuss, although play is seemingly needed by young children (i.e., the cognitive immaturity hypothesis), a prevailing "play ethos" dating back decades[12] has exaggerated its benefits; and the principles of equi-finality and epiphenomena should always be kept in mind.[13,14] Equifinality refers to the idea that many developmental outcomes have alternative pathways (e.g., There is no one royal road to literacy). Epiphenomena signals that confounding variables obscure the role of play in learning and development. Adult tuition, verbal behaviour, social interaction, occurring at the same time as playing might be responsible for the apparent benefits of play and not necessarily the process of playing per se. Christie and Roskos[2] also urge caution about the putative benefits of play as they probe the dynamics of the play-literacy interface searching for moderating and mediating variables in how play processes are related to early literacy and development.

Play teaching, intervention and culture are targeted in other papers in this chapter. Samuelsson and Pramling[3] also refer to the relation of play with learning and development. The concept of the playing-learning child informs the teacher's role in the pedagogy of play (i.e., teacher guided and directed play). Here children's meaning-making and the teacher's curricular objectives include Nordic didactics and content knowledge. Baumer[4] continues the discussion about the pedagogy of play focusing on a particular kind of joint adult-child play "Playworlds" which was coined by Gunilla Lundqvist.[15]

Hart and Tannock[5] add the sensitive topic of thematic violence in play, as in mock fighting and use of war toys, and discuss what the teacher's role should be. The authors stress the socio-emotional needs of children and they make a good point that when they exhibit thematic aggressive play it is not real aggression. Their enthusiasm for adult encouragement of thematic aggression in social pretense deserves more qualification however; the evidence is slim and suggestive at best that playful aggression supported by teachers would be "highly beneficial to child development." Furthermore, there are practical teacher concerns relating to classroom management, such as some children misunderstanding playful aggression.

Gosso and Carvalho[6] aptly note how culture flows throughout play activities, indicate gender differences in play across cultures, and cite how more research is needed about child agency in play and cross-age peer play. There is also interesting work on cultural variations in parental belief systems about play, which can usefully augment their presentation.[16]

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Clark's[7] focus on play therapy balances the earlier entries on play and education with a clear statement about play as healing and its socio-emotional benefits, together with its potential educational or learning benefits. Child well-being (and suffering and how to alleviate it) deserve more attention in play research. Finally, Jenvey[8] discusses methodological problems that beset the study of the play of children with disabilities; she informs the reader about how different impairments affect play. All children whatever their abilities or disabilities have a right to play, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[17]

Development and policy implications

Although a science of play is emerging,[18] obstacles prevail in trying to translate research into new practice and policy; politics and the status quo often stand in the way of change and improvement. Often the agendas of play advocates, such as those for recess in the schools, are driven by much more than research findings. Improvement in turning research into new positive play realities for children in practical settings are more likely to happen by filling the research gap in three areas.

Play evaluation

The literature has attempted to articulate what play is and its attributes and forms in ECDE much more than it has grappled with what is good play.[19] Teachers, therapists and parents need to know more about what to aim for as the next step in a child's play skill.[20] If one is queasy about measuring play quality, perhaps at least calibrating component social and mental skills undergirding play performance can be scrutinized and some yardsticks can be used to gage progress in young children's play actions, words and thoughts. Authentic holistic, transactional, dynamic assessment as an alternative to traditional assessment can include evidence about a child's play skills and interests; but this needs to be done accurately, reliably and validly.

Adult roles

Policy and practice guidelines need to be informed by research on the fine lines between respecting the child's agenda in play and failing to provide adult support and scaffolding. Attention to cultural and individual differences is paramount in importance. Adult agendas and child agendas must be balanced; how to solve the dilemma of meeting both the child's mental and learning needs and socio-emotional needs; how to simultaneously accept and challenge the child at play and learning, at doing and making, inventing and imagining, when the child is

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alone, in small and large groups, at the horizon of new consciousness.[21] Adult involvement in technology play and nature play of children are both important; enriching the play of immigrants and language learners helps these little children become little students in schools.[10]

Shifts over the ECDE range

Play expectations and play benefits are not the same across the early learning continuum from birth to age 8 or 9 years, the traditional definition of ECDE. Play is a medium and context for learning during the early years. Play serves as a "leading activity" for mental development from birth to five years;[22] but schoolwork and subject matter mastery assumes this role in intellectual development as the child enters the latter stages of the early childhood education age range.[23] More research is needed to fill the gaps in what is known about the changing forms and functions of playful learning and learn-full play over the entire range of ECDE. The same applies to the study of cultural contexts, disabilities and play, play therapy and sundry other important play and early childhood topics.

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