

Introduction: Play in Early Childhood Education

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The field of early childhood education has undergone significant changes in recent decades. The number of early childhood programs, the number of early childhood practitioners, and the number of children enrolled in early childhood programs have all increased. In addition, the field has received increased attention from scholars and policymakers. One indication of the increase in attention is the increase in publications relating to early childhood education, both books and periodicals.

Parallel to the increased interest in the field of early childhood education has been the increased attention given to research in the field. A body of empirical and theoretical knowledge has been created that can inform practice. Too often, however, research in the field has only reported to other researchers and does not achieve its potential of informing practice. There has been, on the whole, an inadequate attempt to present the available research in a meaningful, integrated fashion that would be understood by a wide ranging audience of early childhood educators. This audience includes practitioners—administrators and teachers, students at the undergraduate and graduate level, teacher educators, and policymakers. Among the research studies that have been conducted is a broad range of research on children's play in educational settings.

Play has been a part of early childhood programs since the initial kindergarten developed by Friedrich Froebel more than 150 years ago. While play in the Froebelian kindergarten was highly teacher directed, a freer form of educational play evolved in the Macmillan Nursery School and in the reformed kindergarten that was constructed during the progressive education era.

While teachers value children's play, they often do not know how to guide that play to make it more educational. Too often, in reflecting the value of child-initiated activities, teachers set the stage for children's play and observe it, but hesitate to enrich that play. They may fear that to intervene is to create a developmentally inappropriate set of educational practices. However, the lack of intervention may limit the educational outcomes of this play. A large body of research exists on different forms of children's play in educational settings that could inform teachers of young children and help them to improve their practice and support more educational play.

OVERVIEW

This book aims to collect and communicate the research and theoretical knowledge that exists regarding play as a medium of learning and development in the early childhood years. Each chapter provides a different perspective on some aspect of children's play. Each includes a review of research and theory related to that aspect of play as well as implications for practice. The references included with each chapter could point the way to further study on the part of the reader.

In the first chapter we present a brief historical overview of the theories that have been developed to help individuals understand play and to justify its use as a form of education of young children. These theories, both classical and contemporary, provide the reader with a context for the current discourse on play and provides the context for understanding the ideas presented in the chapters that follow.

In Chapter 2, "Playing with a Theory of Mind," Angeline S. Lillard uses children's pretense, or make-believe play, to gain insight into children's theory of mind. Children's play is seen as mental as well as physical activity. Lillard suggests that observations of play can be used to probe how children represent their world and how they think about internal states and social order.

Larry Smolucha and Francine Smolucha analyze post-Piagetian perspectives on play in Chapter 3. They present an historical-social overview of the decline of the Piagetian paradigm for studying children's play and describe the events leading to the reemergence of Vygotskian theory in its place. The Vygotskian framework provides a strong basis for the use of guided pretend play in early education. The Smoluchas suggest that this framework may have especially great significance for the study of the education of infants and toddlers.

David H. Uttal and his colleagues discuss a different aspect of cognitive development in young children in relation to play. They look at the way that children understand the symbols they use. Since symbolic play is typical of

children in the early childhood period, this understanding has significance for teaching young children through play. In addition, the use of hands-on activities to support children's learning through the primary grades is based on the notion that children's manipulation of symbolic materials leads to a greater understanding of the concepts underlying these symbols and their manipulation. While the authors conclude that play is essential in young children's cognitive development, they provide an important caveat: that just because children play with an object does not mean that have learned from that experience.

Robert D. Cavanaugh and Susan Engel, in Chapter 5, extend our understanding of symbolic thought as it emerges in children's play. Their chapter focuses on pretend play and narrative in young children. They identify the continuity between children's make-believe play and adults' responses to works of art. Thus they argue that children use their capacity for make-believe as they mature into adulthood.

In Chapter 6, Kathleen Roskos and Susan Neuman explore the relationship between literacy and play in terms of the interaction of pretense play and literacy-related discourse and the environmental forces that elicit literacy-related behavior in the play context. After reviewing research relating to these themes, they identify research needs, including research to examine the efficacy of play activities for supporting emergent literacy in children, changes in children's literacy behavior in a play context over time, and the adult strategies that facilitate literacy behavior in play.

Gary L. Creasey, Patricia A. Jarvis, and Laura E. Berk look at the role of play in the development of social competence in Chapter 7. They review theories of social competence development from the perspectives of Piaget and Vygotsky. They also see young children's play as reflecting their attachment to their caregivers, the child-rearing practices of their parents, and their peer relations. Since research suggests that adults can promote social competence by guiding young children's play, the authors suggest the need for more studies on play intervention techniques of teachers and the consequences of using these techniques.

In Chapter 8 Kenneth H. Rubin and Robert J. Coplan focus on the developmental aspect of various forms of social and nonsocial children's play. They explore the origins of individual differences in children's social play as well as the developmental outcomes of social and nonsocial children's play. They also suggest future directions of research in children's play, including looking more closely at sex differences in relation to children's social play and at the influence of culture on children's social play.

Fergus P. Hughes reviews the research on the play of children with special educational needs in Chapter 9. He analyzes studies related to preterm infants, those exposed prenatally to drugs, and children with impairments.

These include children with visual and hearing impairments, cognitive and language delays, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, autism, and children who are victims of abuse. Too often the social environment of children with such disabilities does not support engagement in play. Even the inclusion of these children in classes for normally developing children may not be enough to encourage play unless specific interventions are offered. Hughes concludes that teachers and others who work with these children need to provide the necessary scaffolding to enhance their play activities.

In Chapter 10, Jaipal L. Roopnarine and his colleagues examine the cultural context of children's play. They argue that most studies of children's play are grounded in Western, and especially North American cultures. They suggest that we need to consider play in the context of diverse cultures and provide theoretical underpinnings for such a consideration. They review research on parent-child play as well as play among children in different social contexts. They look at traditional forms of play and at the changing social context of children's play. They suggest that introducing play into a school curriculum must be done with attention to the sociocultural context. Such initiatives should embrace culture specific and societywide goals. Traditional forms of play should be preserved in an effort to search for universal forms of play.

In Chapter 11, on play and the assessment of young children, Anthony D. Pellegrini looks at the relationship between these two important elements in early childhood education: play and assessment. He begins by providing definitions for both terms: play and assessment. He then looks at the use of play as a context for assessment. He presents two observational instruments that can be used for this purpose. He concludes his chapter by raising some caveats regarding the observation of children's play as an assessment technique.

Olivia Saracho, in Chapter 12, looks at the relationship of cognitive style and young children's play. She focuses primarily on the field dependent-independent dimension of cognitive style. After reviewing research in the area, Saracho suggests that teachers use play to help children develop competency in both cognitive styles. She also recommends continued study of the relationship between play and children's cognitive styles

Chapter 13, by Joe L. Frost, Dongju Shin, and Paul J. Jacobs focus on understanding the effects of the physical environment on children's play. They identify the physical characteristics of play environments, including spatial arrangements, density, and the availability of play props. They especially look at the characteristics of playground environments, including play materials and equipment. In concluding their chapter the authors provide guidelines for developing physical environments in support of children's play.

Since the beginning of this century, controversy has ranged over whether young children confuse fantasy and reality. Montessori did not

include play activities in her curriculum. She argued that children confuse fantasy with reality and she believed that children at this age should focus on understanding reality. Brian Vandenberg, in his chapter, "Real and Unreal: A Vital Developmental Dichotomy," asserts that children communicate their intent to play and then enter into play situations that require them to mutually understand what is real and what is unreal. The ability to suspend reality allows children to preserve the mythic playful aspects of childhood while enhancing their cognitive and social skills. He warns that heavy-handed adult guidance can destroy the freedom and joy of play for children.

Taken together these chapters reflect a broad view of the current state of knowledge regarding children's play. They provide suggestions for researchers studying children's play. They also identify the implications of our current state of knowledge for teachers and others who work with young children. We believe that the materials presented in this volume should open new horizons, especially for those in early childhood education, a field that for many generations has venerated play as a medium for the education of young children.