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"Does not." "Does too."

Thinking About Play in the Early Childhood Classroom

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Doubts and questions about the educational value of play appear to have become widespread in recent years, and the push for a more "basic skills" or academic orientation in the early childhood classroom rests, in part, on the fact that there is little quantifiable

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evidence that children benefit from play in educational settings. The protean nature of play, which eludes precise definition and clear explanation despite the efforts of numerous experts and theorists, exacerbates the confusion.

In an effort to understand what practitioners themselves understand or believe about play, Erikson professor Joan Brooks McLane conducted a multi-year study. Erikson master's students gathered data on approximately 90 early childhood teachers from a range of programs in the greater Chicago area, including Head Start, state prekindergarten, private preschools, child care, and Chicago Public School kindergartens. The teachers, who had widely varying levels of education and training, completed a questionnaire and were interviewed and observed in the classroom by the student researchers. They were asked to define play and describe its most important qualities; to explain how they thought play was related to children's learning and development; to describe their role in relation to children's play; and finally, to identify the possible connections between play and early literacy development.

The results of the study suggest that the diversity of knowledge, beliefs, and practices among early childhood practitioners—who are ultimately responsible for how play is implemented in specific classrooms—affect many aspects of the child's play experience. Although most of the interviewed teachers viewed play as important, the amount of time devoted to play varied widely, and teachers did not make explicit connections between play and cognitive challenge, symbolic and abstract thinking, or early literacy development. Further, many teachers paid little attention to the play activities in their classrooms. Those who did engage with the children's play did so in a manner that did not enhance the cognitive level or challenge of the play. Further, teachers gave low ratings to the importance of play in literacy development, suggesting either a lack of awareness of theory and research on the subject or disinterest in these connections.

These variations in thinking and practice suggest that when talking about the value of play, educators and practitioners may well be talking past one another. That is, discussions about the educational value of "play" may actually be about the value of quite different phenomena—or about quite different aspects of one very complex phenomenon. It may not be fruitful to debate the role of play in educational settings without first recognizing its elusiveness and complexity and then trying to articulate the specific qualities of play that would suggest it does or does not belong in a particular early childhood classroom.

"Does not." "Does too." Thinking About Play in the Early Childhood Classroom

Play—generally taken to mean freely chosen, engaging, pleasurable activities, which may or may not include elements of pretend—has long been central to the practice of most professionals who work with young children. Indeed, many leaders in the field of early childhood have argued that play is the most—even the only—developmentally appropriate way for young children to learn (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In recent years, however, doubts and questions about the educational value of play appear to have become widespread.

I believe there are several possible sources for such concerns. The first, I suspect, comes from a pervasive sense that many schools are failing to educate young children—especially poor and minority children—and that the appropriate remedy is to start "real school" at increasingly younger ages. There is, after all, a great deal of hard evidence—e.g., test scores, school dropout rates—that indicate many schools are not doing well by large numbers of children, and there is little *quantifiable* evidence that children benefit from play in educational settings. This, in part, explains why there is a push for more "academic" activities and/or a more "basic skills" orientation in early childhood programs—in essence, a push to make preschool more like elementary school (Glickman, 1984; Shepard & Smith, 1988).

Second, questions about play reflect an important shift in thinking about child development knowledge and practice. In recent years, the field has become increasingly aware that both child development knowledge and notions of "developmentally appropriate" or "best practice"—once assumed to be universal—are in fact deeply rooted in local and specific cultural beliefs, values, and experience. This means that when designing and assessing programs for young children, the beliefs, values, and practices of a given community's cultural context must be considered, and that play in educational settings *necessarily* reflects differences in local beliefs and practices—including beliefs about the educational value of play, as opposed to, say, "direct instruction." Thus, it is risky to identify any single approach as universally "developmentally appropriate" (Farver, Kim & Lee, 1995; Lubeck, 1985; Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff, Goncu, & Mosier, 1993; Stott & Bowman, 1996; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989; Roskos & Christie, 2000).

Third, while the academic literature on play, learning, and development is rich and suggestive, it is hardly conclusive. As an area of academic study play

continues to elude precise definition and clear explanation; scholars refer to play as an "elusive" phenomenon, liken it to "quicksilver," and describe it as "Protean" because it is always changing shape and direction (Garvey, 1990). In spite of the fact that play is so hard to pin down and so open to interpretation—or maybe because of it—the amount and diversity of scholarly work on children's play is staggering. Much has been, and continues to be, written about play and its potential connections to all aspects of young children's development and learning (Garvey, 1990; Fein, 1981; Sutton-Smith, 1997). As a domain of study, play is claimed by disciplines as diverse as developmental psychology, psychodynamic theory, psychotherapy, cultural anthropology, sociology, biology, ethology, and early childhood education. Play scholarship resists consensus on what specific aspects of play promote specific kinds of learning and development, and assessing direct outcomes or benefits of children's play remains a difficult, perhaps impossible, task. For example, while there are persuasive theoretical reasons as well as sound research support for the idea that play can facilitate early literacy, problem-solving, and abstract thinking, studies are suggestive rather than conclusive (Christie, 1991; Dyson, 1986, 1990; McLane & McNamee, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Play has been observed and interpreted from many perspectives, both structural and functional, and has been analyzed in terms of learning, adaptation, exploration, experimentation, communication, socialization, acculturation, creativity, mastery, and so forth (Bateson, 1976; Bruner, 1976; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Schwartzman, 1978). All this suggests that using scholarly theory and research to argue for or against play in educational settings is problematic. Further, as Sutton-Smith suggests, whatever children are learning as they play will be hard to identify because play's effects are likely to be both subtle and indirect (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

I believe there is another source of confusion in debates about the value of play in early childhood settings that reflects the diversity of knowledge, beliefs, and practices among early childhood practitioners. Classroom teachers are ultimately responsible for how play is implemented in specific classrooms, and their beliefs and practices affect many aspects of the child's play experience (McLane & Spielberger, 1995, 1996). I first became aware of this diversity while working with Head Start and other preschool teachers in their classrooms, and later through teaching a course on play theory and practice to preservice teachers in the master's degree program at Erikson Institute. I found myself continually challenged in my attempts to get teachers and students to look closely at play

and to think about it carefully and analytically. In part to encourage and facilitate this process, I engaged master's students in an exploratory research project in which, over the years, they collected data on approximately 90 early childhood teachers from a range of programs in the greater Chicago area, including Head Start, state prekindergarten, private preschools, child care, and Chicago Public School kindergartens. The teachers in these programs had widely varying levels of education and training; some held high school diplomas, some AA degrees, some CDA credentials[1], some college degrees, and a few, master's degrees; roughly 30 percent are African American or Hispanic.

Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Teachers who participated in this project completed a questionnaire and were interviewed and observed in the classroom by the student researcher.[2] I will describe briefly how these teachers defined play and described its most important qualities; how they thought play was related to children's learning and development; how they saw their role in relation to children's play; and finally, the possible connections they perceived between play and early literacy development. I will consider some implications of these findings for thinking about the current discourse on play in early childhood practice and for helping practitioners think more clearly about the role of play in early childhood education. Since the sample of teachers in this study is not representative, the responses presented here, although illustrative and provocative, cannot be generalized.

What Teachers Say About Play

As a starting point, teachers were asked to define play and to describe its most important qualities. Here are some representative *definitions* from this diverse group of teachers:

- Having fun or doing things that give you pleasure.
- A time of freedom for children.
- Anything a child does that [he/she] enjoys.
- Anytime someone is free to choose what they are doing.
- Adult free—what kids do when grown-ups don't structure their lives, when adults stay out of their lives.
- How children learn.
- A natural instinct of the child.
- The work of children—they enjoy what they are doing.

[1] A child development associate (CDA) has received inservice training and supervision and taken some college courses in child development.

[2] Teachers completed a questionnaire, participated in a 45–60 minute interview, and were observed in their classrooms during "playtime" (or its equivalent) for at least one hour. Instruments were adapted from those developed by Julie Spielberger. (See Spielberger, 1999, Head Start teachers' beliefs and representations about the role of play in early childhood development and education. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Loyola University Chicago.) Data were collected from 90 teachers. Data from 65 teachers were analyzed.

- The work of children—it is how they experiment and figure things out.
- Something you get to do after your work is done—it is enjoyable, recreational.

Here is a representative sampling of teachers' descriptions of the most important *qualities* of play:

- The ability to discover and experiment on one's own.
- Exploratory, independent. . . . Children guide, lead, or discover their own learning activities.
- Joyful.
- Joy of doing what you want to do.
- Unstructured.
- Freely chosen by the child.
- Open-ended.
- Provides ego satisfaction.
- Hands on.
- Interactions with others.

Teachers were also asked about possible connections between play and specific aspects of young children's development, choosing three among the following options.[3]

- ☐ Ability to use symbols/think abstractly
- ☐ Cognitive/intellectual
- ☐ Language/communication
- ☐ Literacy
- ☐ Personal/sense of self
- ☐ Physical
- ☐ Social

[3] In early versions of the questionnaire, teachers were asked to rate the importance of play in various areas of development, using a 1–5 point Likert scale. Because most teachers ranked play as equally important in all areas of development, a "forced choice" question was developed in which teachers were asked to select only three choices and to rank order them.

As Table 1 indicates, a great majority of teachers selected social, personal/self, and language/communication; few teachers chose abstract thinking; and almost none (4 of 65) selected literacy.

Overall, what do these teachers' responses tell us? Most emphasize play as enjoyable, pleasurable, and freely chosen by the child and identify such important qualities as open-endedness, lack of structure, and the opportunities play offers for discovery and exploration. The qualities of enjoyment, pleasure,

Table 1. Teacher Ratings of Play and Aspects of Development (N = 65)

	Rated 1	Rated 2	Rated 3	Rated 1, 2, or 3	No Rating
Social	15	20	17	51	14
Personal/sense of self	29	11	9	49	16
Language/communication	7	21	20	48	17
Cognitive/intellectual	9	5	7	19	46
Symbols/think abstractly	3	6	6	15	50
Physical	1	2	3	6	59
Literacy	1	0	3	4	61

choice, and the opportunity for exploration mesh with play characteristics identified by Garvey (1990) and many others (Huizinga, 1955; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). However, it is worth noting that these teachers do *not* emphasize some other aspects of play mentioned by scholars, such as possible connections between play and cognitive challenge, symbolic and abstract thinking, or early literacy development (Bruner, 1976; Dyson, 1990; Nicolopoulou, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). That is, most of these teachers do not make explicit connections between the engagement and motivation associated with play and the consequent acceptance of cognitive challenge or "submission to rules" described by Vygotsky (1978).

It seems possible that the language these teachers use to describe and define play—both what they say and do not say—may contribute to confusion and misunderstanding in discussions about play in educational settings. For example, the notions of pleasure and freedom associated with play seem likely to trigger strong reactions of approval or disapproval; they may be enormously appealing to some educators and highly suspect to others. To some, freedom and pleasure suggest interest, focus, and commitment, while to others they may suggest a lack of effort or seriousness, perhaps frivolity. The qualities attributed to play also mesh with the values and practices generally identified with "developmentally appropriate practice" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), and thus may further contribute to a sense that play has little potential connection with preparing children for academic instruction. Thus, some teachers and administrators concerned about preparing preschool children for elementary school may

simply dismiss arguments for play as irrelevant—in part *because* of the language its proponents use to support it.

Play in Practice: The Teacher's Role

The role of the teacher in children's play is multifaceted. Teachers schedule time for play, organize and equip the play environment, and generally manage play—they set ground rules, decide what activities constitute play, and decide how to relate to play while it is in progress (Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Spielberger, 1996; Kontos, 1999). During play, teachers may serve in several possible roles—observer, facilitator, stage manager, mediator, scribe, and/or player—or they may pay little attention to play (Jones & Reynolds, 1992). In this study there were considerable differences among teachers in describing—and enacting—the teacher's role. There were differences in how teachers structured play, the amount of time they provided for it, and how, while it was in progress, they responded to it. And there were differences in the activities teachers included in the category of play, although most teachers listed a wide range of activities[4], e.g., using art materials, puzzles, and other manipulatives; block construction; as well as pretend or dramatic play (also see Pelligrini & Galda, 2000). The overall amount of *time* teachers allotted for play on a daily basis ranged widely: Some offered as little as 15 to 20 minutes and some as much as two hours, with the average about 45 to 60 minutes a day. These vastly differing amounts of time of course reflect the nature of the specific teacher's early childhood program—pre-school, Head Start, state prekindergarten, public school kindergarten, and so forth. But program variation does not account for all the temporal variation, some of which reflects the teacher's and/or the program director's preference.

[4] Teachers also had a variety of names for play in their classrooms, including "play time," "free play time," "free time," "choice time," "center time," "discovery time," and "work time."

The majority of teachers described their role in relation to children's play as that of observer and/or facilitator. However, some teachers felt strongly that they should keep their hands entirely off children's play, while others felt equally strongly that they should be directly involved in all aspects of play. Here is a sampling of how teachers described their role, on a continuum from least to most involved:

- To keep them safe. Period.
- Stay out of the way unless there's a problem.
- I am present in the room and watching out of the corner of my eye and minding my own business.
- I am usually just an observer.

- I never interrupt play without a good reason. A good reason might be if a child is being excluded, or if safety [is] an issue. Play should be adult free.

- The teacher's role is to set up an environment that is conducive to constructive, focused play which leads to learning.

- To observe, sometimes give suggestions, sometimes join in and play along, provide materials to promote discussion and interest.

- Play and interaction in [children's] play I see as one and the same. I feel it is important to be part of them, to talk, to show, to share, to be approachable and moving with them.

- [I] play with [children] to encourage the play, [I make] suggestions on play to guide the children. . . .

- Yes, I play with children. I play as much as I can, regularly. I am involved by suggesting things to do, building [blocks] with them, being a character in a story, the big bad wolf or a monster. . . .

Clearly, there is wide variation among teachers when they talk about what they do while children are engaged in play. There also appear to be some discrepancies between teachers' *own* role descriptions and what student researchers observed them doing while children were engaged in play; that is, several student researchers noted that not all teachers did what they claimed (and perhaps believed) they did. For example, some teachers who described themselves as "players" appeared to be more stage managers than actual players. Many self-described "observers" did spend their time observing (and sometimes taking notes), while other "observers" used play time to do other things in the classroom, apparently paying little attention to play unless there was a disruption that called for their attention. (For example, one student researcher—who was also a Head Start director—interviewed and observed one of the teachers in her program and was upset to discover how little this teacher's practice matched her words. During the interview, the teacher had talked about the importance of play for learning and the teacher as a "role model" during play; however, the student found the teacher doing paperwork [mostly record-keeping] throughout the time allotted for play. The student's comment about this teacher was, "her words say 'play is important' but her actions say 'it's more important for me to get the things done I need to get done.'" A student in another classroom observed: "The teachers were not able to stop their 'busy work' [filing papers, changing art paper, cleaning paint brushes, washing children's hands after the art project] long enough to observe and question the children's play. . . . These

teachers were so busy with mundane tasks they did not know what types of play were developing.")

In contrast, some student researchers observed teachers who responded to invitations to participate in the play, served as an appreciative audience, offered children descriptive and/or interpretive comments on their play, asked questions, made suggestions, and/or modeled possible uses of play materials. Teachers' comments, however, tended to be friendly and supportive, as opposed to challenging or extending. For example, one teacher said to a group of girls in the housekeeping area, "I'm so glad someone is going to dress those babies. It's cold out today." Another teacher noticed a girl making designs with magnetic tiles and said, "Hey, that looks like a pie. . . . What kind is it? Strawberry?" Although these teachers *were* paying attention to children's play, their comments do not seem well designed to enhance the cognitive level or challenge of the play (see Kontos, 1999).

Play and literacy in the classroom

Student researchers observed few activities involving both play and literacy; many noted a general lack of play-related literacy materials and activities. In many classrooms, students noted that there were few books and writing materials outside of a designated "library" area (and, if it existed at all, a writing/drawing area). This meant that literacy materials were not integrated with other play materials and their use was not encouraged throughout the classroom. On the other hand, one student noted that the teacher she observed did have a literacy-rich play environment and that she encouraged the inclusion of writing in play; however, this same teacher had not mentioned any links between play and literacy in her interview or questionnaire. She appeared to be supporting literacy without being aware she was doing so. These observations, along with teachers' low ratings of play's importance for literacy development, suggest that many of them either are not aware of theory and research on the potential connections between play and early literacy development, or that they are not particularly interested in these connections. These findings echo other recent research, suggesting a "knowledge gap" between scholarship and classroom practice regarding play and early literacy development and that findings about, for example, play and early writing development are not widely known among practitioners in the field (Dyson, 1990; Spielberger, 1996; McLane & Spielberger, 1996; Roskos & Christie, 2002; Patterson, in preparation).

Conclusion

These descriptive findings suggest there is considerable range and variation in what teachers know, believe, and practice in relation to play in their early childhood classrooms, and that, from the child's perspective, there must be differences in the nature and quality of the classroom play experience, and, presumably, in any developmental consequences it may have. Consider the large differences in the amount of time children are given for play and differences in how much teachers involve themselves in the play. When, for example, only 15 to 20 minutes is allotted for play, it would seem to belong in a category much like recess—a time for children to relax, let off steam, and so forth, so they can go back to other (work?) activities refreshed. Compare such a brief play experience to that of the child who has an hour (or more) to choose and direct her own activity. And whether or not the teacher involves herself directly in children's play, and the ways in which she does this, must also affect the child's play experience.[5]

[5] Although, as Kontos (1999) observed, even when the teacher is continuously involved in the play she actually spends very little time with any one child.

If the kinds of variation in thinking and practice described in this paper are widespread—and I believe they are—it means that when talking about the value of play, educators and practitioners may well be talking past one another. That is, discussions about the educational value of "play" may actually be about the value of quite different phenomena—or about quite different aspects of one very complex phenomenon. In a sense, these discussions mirror the state of scholarly research on play in their lack of consensus on what play is and how it does, or does not, affect development. It may not be fruitful, then, to debate the role of play in educational settings without first recognizing its elusiveness and complexity and then trying to articulate the specific qualities of play that would suggest it does or does not belong in a particular early childhood classroom.

Clarity in thinking about play seems particularly urgent for those who want to defend play against critics pushing for a more "academic" approach to early education. Only if and when early childhood professionals think carefully and analytically about play can they be clear about what they know, believe, and value about play and why they promote it in their classrooms. How should we—as teacher educators—communicate about the vital but slippery subject of play effectively? How do we communicate findings and insights from scholarly research in an intellectually honest way—in a way that recognizes both depth and complexity as well as areas of uncertainty in scholarly thinking about play—and that is helpful to practitioners?

I believe early childhood practitioners need a comprehensive, sophisticated, and reflective understanding of play in order to understand and exploit whatever possible roles it may have in children's learning. This includes knowing something about the theoretical richness and the range and scope of thinking about play, along with their possible implications for development and education. In addition, practitioners should be aware of ambiguities and unanswered questions about play and understand that there is still much that we do not know about play and how it relates to learning. In a sense, practitioners need to know enough about play to be both its advocates and skeptics. This means recognizing play's potential importance in many aspects of children's learning and development without romanticizing it and without reducing it to fuzzy, simplistic slogans or "mantras" (Bennett, Wood & Rogers, 1997) such as "play is the child's work" or "play is the child's way of learning." This is a challenging task.

Based on my own work, and on my reading of theory and research, I am increasingly convinced that what really matters about play is that it both depends on and embodies a particular approach or frame of mind. Abundant research has made it clear that play can be about anything and everything, that it cannot be defined by its content or subject matter (Bruner et al., 1976; Garvey 1977, 1990; Sutton-Smith, 1997; and many others). In other words, what identifies play as play is a particular *attitude* or *approach* to materials, behaviors, and ideas and *not* the materials or activities or ideas themselves; play is a special mode of thinking and doing. This mode is nonliteral, marking activities as not-for-real, not-for-profit, without real-world cost or consequences. This allows an open-ended, exploratory, hypothetical approach in which ends are subordinated to means. This mode allows the player to take a *what if/as if* approach, to try out materials and ideas without having to worry about making a final product and without fear of failure. The process of play confers a sense of possibility, as well as ownership, control, and competence on the player. That is, playing with materials, activities, identities, rules, and ideas *may*, over time, facilitate the development of nonliteral, abstract, hypothetical, experimental, and creative modes of doing and thinking. And play may also promote a sense of connection to and confidence with the object or subject of play. For example, when a child is able to play with valued cultural tools and activities—such as writing implements and other literacy materials—the child *may* develop both familiarity and knowledge, as well as a sense of ownership and control of the activities of writing and reading (McLane & McNamee, 1990).

If play is essentially a process, then whether or not this kind of process belongs in an early childhood classroom must depend on the specific context—on the values, purposes, and goals of the particular classroom. Decisions about play should not be based on bandwagon enthusiasms or received wisdom but rather on careful analysis and reflection. The question for teachers would seem to be this: What might the process of play do for the children in my classroom? How might play's nonliteral frame—with its accompanying sense of control, freedom, and openness—advance my developmental and educational objectives?

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Herr Research Center at Erikson Institute

The Herr Research Center, established in 1997 with a gift from the Herr family, is the hub of research activities at Erikson Institute. Its mission is the development of knowledge from applied research that contributes to a significant improvement in the quality, effectiveness, and equity of education and services for children and families. The center provides technical assistance and funding for the development and implementation of a wide variety of research projects, promotes the dissemination of research findings, and sponsors conferences and seminars.

Dedicated to addressing the interests and needs of an increasingly diverse society, center-supported research initiatives work with populations that vary in age, race, and ethnicity, with a primary focus on programs and populations in disadvantaged communities. The center is committed to providing a sound and useful base of information to guide the understanding of complex social issues such as changing family and societal needs and families in stress as well as the nature and efficacy of services for children and families.

Current research projects

Caregiving Consensus Groups with Latina Mothers

Children and Violence Project

Computer Training for Early Childhood Teachers Project

Doula Support for Young Mothers Project (in collaboration with the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago)

Erikson Arts Project

Faculty Development Project on the Brain

Fathers and Families

Fussy Baby Network

The Helping Relationship in Early Childhood Interventions Project

Bridging: A Diagnostic Assessment for Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood Classrooms

Project Match

Reggio Emilia Project

Schools Project

Teacher Attitudes About Play

The Unmet Needs Project

Publications available from the Herr Research Center

Applied Research in Child Development Number 1, After School Programs

Applied Research in Child Development Number 2, Father Care

Applied Research in Child Development Number 3, Welfare Reform

Applied Research in Child Development Number 4, Assessment

"Lessons from Beyond the Service World," Judith S. Musick, Ph.D.

"Harder Than You Think: Determining What Works, for Whom, and Why in Early Childhood Interventions," Jon Korfmacher, Ph.D.

"Child Assessment at the Preprimary Level: Expert opinion and state trends," Carol Horton, Ph.D., and Barbara T. Bowman, M.A.

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