

Original Paper

Work Hard and Play Hard: Perceptions of Play in Early Childhood Programs

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Abstract

This paper explored the perceptions of principals and teachers concerning the role of play in early childhood programs during an ethos of high stakes accountability. All early childhood participants identified play as a learning tool, but noted it was being eliminated from the curriculum due to high stake accountability. Viewed differently between administrators and early childhood educators was the purpose of play. Revealed were implications for administrators, teachers, and policymakers. The implications for this research and practice include that both administration and early childhood teachers must understand the value of play and implement play within the school day.

Keywords

early childhood education, high stake accountability, use of play within the curriculum

1. Introduction

Imagine two very different scenarios: one five-year-old child on the school readiness track completes workbook pages and practices proper letter formation as part of his/her evening ritual. Meanwhile, another five-year-old child plays with his/her parents on the floor, describing the various vehicles they are driving and counting who has the most. Which child is learning more? Finding an appropriate answer may be as much about the school day structure as it is about the contextualizing of the lessons for the child (Chaille, 2008). Taylor and Boyer (2020) highlighted,

With a heavy increase in academic expectations and standards to be learned in the early years, educators are facing the challenge of integrating important academic standards into developmentally appropriate learning experiences for children in kindergarten. To meet this challenge, there is a need to become familiar with the role of play in the classroom (p. 128).

Prompted by this heavier focus on rigor and accountability, the challenge for today's early childhood education includes the perceived role of play (Elkind, 2007). Educational stakeholders are forced to review the role of play in the school setting, leaving some to wonder, has "play" become an objectionable four-letter word? Conversely, Conyers and Wilson (2015) noted, "Learning is not just a cognitive function. Thinking, feeling, and physicality all come together to develop new knowledge and skills" (p. 38).

These changes in legislation and expectations regarding school readiness heavily impacted what play looks like and how it is perceived. Because these additional challenges and pressures accompany increased rigor and accountability measures (Madsen et al., 2014), play has taken a backseat as an educational tool (Gagnon et al., 2014). Consequently researchers (Gagnon et al., 2014) stressed this as a serious omission in a child's development since play can serve multiple functions in a child's life. As a result this qualitative study explored administrators' and teachers' perceptions concerning the role of play in a child's early education. The purpose of this study was to determine what were the perceptions of the use of play within an early childhood program surrounded by high stakes accountability practices. The following research questions guided this study:

1. *What are perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the role of play in a child's education?*
2. *How does implementation of the kindergarten through third grade performance standards affect the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders?*

1.1 Conceptual Framework

Although research evidencing the general benefits of play exists, there is less research available linking constructivism (Piaget, 1929) and play in becoming school ready (Rivera, 2009). Piaget's (1929) constructivist learning theory strongly stresses active learning, constructing new ideas and/or concepts based on either prior or current knowledge, or some combination of the two. Chaille (2008) defined constructivism as "a theory of learning that posits that children construct knowledge through interaction between their own ideas and experiences in the social and physical world" (p. 5). Similarly, DESE (2013) noted individuals construct knowledge "as a result of dynamic interactions with the physical and social environments" (p. 3) and further asserted constructivist learning theory is more about a reorganization of how one thinks as they build upon the *known* rather than development or a gathering of facts alone. Constructivism, which emphasizes children actively construct their experience and knowledge through the environment, has been advocated worldwide (Porcaro, 2011).

Teachers are the mainstay of constructivist teaching (Piaget, 1929) because they are the educational providers. If they do not embrace the constructivist approach, then fidelity to the curriculum is lost and so are a host of valuable learning opportunities for the children. When implementing constructivist learning theory, the educator should encourage students to discover principles for themselves, promoting active discussion and hands-on opportunities (Bailey, 2014; Chaille, 2008; Epstein, 2009). Through exploration and opportunities for hands-on learning, children are able to make sense of the

world around them and to construct their own knowledge (Chaille, 2008). In allowing children to immerse their five senses into their learning, they are able to take in all aspects of an activity—what they see, what they hear, what they smell, what they feel, and, when safe and appropriate, what they taste. Providing these types of rich experiences through play addresses the needs of the whole child, not just within the confines of academia (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein, 2014). The students lead activities and the instructor acts as a facilitator in order to extend learning through asking meaningful questions and promoting development of critical thinking skills in a constructivist learning approach (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Brown and Vaughan (2010) asserted, “Play allows society to function and individual relationships among many to flourish” (p. 88). Though the look of play has changed as society has changed, the benefits of play remain consistent.

In any quality early childhood curriculum, learning and play are interchangeable (Bailey, 2011). According to Ormrod (2008), “Piaget suggested that effective discovery learning should be largely a child-initiated and child-directed effort” (p. 326). Brown and Vaughan (2010) agreed, arguing that authentic play comes from deep within the child and is not formed or motivated solely by others (p. 104).

Consequently, play has a significant role in the development and individualization of these projects. As Brown and Vaughan (2010) further stated, “Real play interacts with and involves the outside world, but it fundamentally expresses the needs and desires of the player” (p. 104). Again, evidence of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist philosophies through student initiated, hands-on learning experiences is noted.

Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory is prevalent in curriculum when the following tenets are utilized: shared classroom control, active engagement between peers and teachers, and developmentally appropriate hands-on learning experiences based upon children’s individual needs and interests. The power of play is again evident in these curricula as well, as “it [play] integrates our deep physiological, emotional, and cognitive capacities, and quite without knowing it, we grow” (Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 104).

In a constructivist environment, children take initiative and integrate what they learn from different disciplines (Epstein, 2009, 2014), but most of all, they learn flexibility, are eager to learn new skills, and adapt to rapidly changing challenges (Helm & Katz, 2011). Elkind (2007) incorporated play into the constructivist learning theory paradigm, stressing that children need time to exercise their predisposition for fantasy, imagination, and creativity, as these are “the mental tools required for success in higher-level math and science” (p. x). Furthermore, play can create a social context where children learn to use language as a tool to communicate in a meaningful way (Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). Altun (2018) highlighted,

Play as an important context in which learning and development occurs. This finding has an important meaning because it revealed that the participants value the play in children’s learning and development (p. 96).

Though the benefits are countless, there are limitations to the constructivist learning theory. Behaviorists tend to view constructivism as too soft, meaning the teacher should have the control, as it is not meant to be shared with the children (DESE, 2013). Because child-directed activities such as play dominate this type of constructivist environment, adults question what type of learning is taking place as well as *how* learning is occurring (Brown, 2010). In many cases, early education classrooms are perceived as childcare rather than recognizing the valuable learning experiences they provide through the constructivist approach. This approach is often misunderstood, as up until this point many school districts have taken on the behaviorist approach of teacher-led activities involving lecture and worksheets in order to address the increasing rigor and accountability measures (Elkind, 2007). The dramatic increase in school rigor and accountability relative to ESSA (EOP, 2015), and MLS (DESE, 2016) have given rise to inadvertent challenges and pressures on educational stakeholders, resulting in the perception of play as frivolous rather than a quality educational tool (Brown & Vaughan, 2010).

2. Method

This study used a qualitative approach to explore perceptions of early childhood stakeholders regarding the use of play as an educational tool. Qualitative research seeks to explain the meaning of social phenomena, understand the meaning people construct, and how they make sense of the world (Creswell, 2015). Participants were selected according to a purposeful representational sample, dividing the state of Missouri into four quadrants (Northeast, Southeast, Northwest, and Southwest), and selecting participants from across the state (Mertens, 2010). As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) postulated using a phenomenological approach allows the subjective aspects of behavior to be emphasized. Within this inquiry these qualitative researchers examined the interactions as a way to determine understanding of perceptions through interpretation. This qualitative investigation examined the perceptions of early childhood teachers and administrators regarding the amount of play that was allowed within the early childhood curriculum and the value of that play towards the child's development.

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study each had extensive involvement with teaching or administrating within early childhood programs. Within each of these four quadrants, three school districts with early childhood programs were selected, resulting in twelve participating school districts. Subsequently, early childhood administrators (i.e., principals or directors) and one teacher from each of the four quadrants volunteered to participate in one-on-one interviews, totaling four administrative interviews and five teacher interviews, as there was one additional teacher participating from one of the districts. Participants' demographic data including gender, years of experience in education, job responsibility/area(s) of certification, and school size is summarized in Figure 1.

<i>Demographic</i>	<i>Choices</i>	<i>Results</i>
<i>Gender</i>	<i>Male</i>	0%
	<i>Female</i>	100%
<i>Years of Experience with Early Childhood</i>	<i>Completing 1-5 years</i>	0%
	<i>Completing 6-10 years</i>	25%
	<i>Completing 11-15 years</i>	37.5%
	<i>Completing 16-20 years</i>	12.5%
	<i>Completing 20+ years</i>	25%
<i>Area of Certification</i>	<i>Infants to 2-year-old classroom</i>	12.5%
	<i>3-5 year old classroom</i>	50%
	<i>Building Level Administrator (PK-Gr 5)</i>	25%
	<i>Building Level Administrator (PK only)</i>	
	<i>Central Office Administration</i>	12.5%
<i>School Size</i>		0%
	<i>Less than 100 students</i>	12.5%
	<i>Between 100 to 300 students</i>	25%
	<i>Between 300 to 500 students</i>	25%
	<i>More than 500 students</i>	37.5%

Figure 1. Demographic Data of Participants. N=9.

As in any examination that involves human subjects, followed were ethical guidelines essential to protect the participants. These protections included but were not limited to safeguarding the participants from harm, assuring confidentiality, and avoiding any deception for the participants involved in the research (Creswell, 2015). Gathered were data from interviews of early childhood education administrators and teachers.

2.1.1 Instrumentation Protocol

The researchers interviewed face-to-face each of the four early childhood administrators once and followed up with a telephone interview, with each interview audio-recorded. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The administrator at each site then selected the early childhood teacher to be interviewed. At one setting the administrator wanted two teachers interviewed. Again, the interviews were face-to-face with follow up telephone interviews. These interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes in length. After the interviews, transcription occurred, followed by member checking to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and confirm for each participant that their stories were portrayed as intended (Creswell, 2015). Additionally, the researchers took field notes during the interview process to record information not reflected during the transcription. After each face-to-face interview, the researchers were allowed to observe an early childhood classroom and the children at play. Triangulation of the

data occurred using rich, thick descriptions provided from the interviews, field notes, and observations (Creswell, 2015).

2.1.2 Data Analysis

According to Hatch (2002), “Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories” (p. 148). Data for this study were interpreted utilizing inductive analysis as the researchers immersed themselves into the data searching for concepts from a constructivist viewpoint. Inductive thought begins with the specific and moves to the general, starting with certain fragments of evidence and piecing them together to form a meaningful whole (Hatch, 2002).

First, broad categories that emerged were clearly defined and color-coded so that information could be filtered accordingly (Seidman, 2006). Mertens (2010) referred to such classification schemes as etic, meaning schemes generated by the researcher prior to data collection. Although the researchers undoubtedly had certain classification schemes in mind for the research analysis, they specifically sought those of an emic nature, meaning those found in the culture of organizations (i.e., PK-12 educational institutions) themselves (Creswell, 2015). As themes and patterns emerged, the researchers worked to move from narrow to increasingly abstract domains exhibited across the varying data types (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data outliers were filtered in two ways: they were color-coded according to categories in closest relation as well as to maintain a separate category for all outliers as a means of accounting for that information throughout the analysis process.

3. Settings

These districts represented urban, suburban and rural school settings. Though there were slight variances in student demographics for each of the sites, the predominant student demographic for each was White Non-Hispanic, followed by an African-American student population within the urban settings, and Hispanic population throughout sites.

3.1 Site 1 This suburban school district has developed many programs that address the significant learning that occurs from birth through age five, including high quality early childhood classrooms designed to meet families’ needs as well as Parents As Teachers. Specifically, the early childhood program serves 260 to 300 students throughout the year.

3.2 Site 2 This rural school setting has an early childhood program that houses both early childhood education classrooms in the elementary school and served 40 students each year. The early childhood program hosts special needs students, Title I students, as well as preschool students.

3.3 Site 3 This urban school district has an early childhood program in a variety of buildings across the district and serves over 500 students.

3.4 Site 4 Within this suburban school district, early childhood opportunities are well supported, and there is a wide array of programs available to children and families to meet each family’s diverse needs.

This district serves 200 early childhood education students annually.

3.5 *Site 5* This is an early childhood program in a rural setting that includes 40-50 students as well as a Head Start programming in one building.

3.6 *Site 6* This is an urban school district, serves approximately 550 students in early childhood through a variety of available programs.

3.7 *Site 7* This suburban district is set within a middle-class neighborhood serving approximately 250 students.

3.8 *Site 8* A rural early childhood program that hosts special needs students, Title I students, as well as preschool students who are developmentally on target and serving as peer models. Serves 50 students

3.9 *Site 9* This is an urban district that serves over 800 students in early childhood. This school district houses an early childhood learning center that serves children ages birth to five years old.

3.10 *Site 10* This suburban district has a highly acclaimed early childhood program that serves 212 students.

3.11 *Site 11* This rural district serves approximately 40-45 students with Head Start housed with the program.

3.12 *Site 12* This urban setting has early childhood programs with approximately 475 students spread throughout the district.

4. Results

Q1 What are perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the role of play in a child's education?

Interview participants were also asked to explain their view of play. Though responses varied, impressively, the perception that play is learning was shared among all teacher interviewees. As one teacher participant stated, "Play is the crucible in which imagination and creativity can be cultivated and expressed. Play with other children is critical for the development of social skills. Learning occurs in all areas of development as young children play". Another teacher participant had the following to say about her view of play as an educational tool:

I think that definitely play is one of the first pieces that teachers need to explore when they're introducing a new subject matter or a new tool in the classroom. In kindergarten, I see play as being one of the most important ways to teach our children to socialize with each other, to collaborate with each other, to problem solve, and to learn how to have respectful conversations with each other.

Though more succinct, another teacher agreed that play has a large role in the learning process, as she stated:

I think play is very important. I think that's how the number one way that children learn. I mean they have the hands-on experience. That is a child's work. Just through the opportunities and experiences that we provide them, they learn at their level. They learn through their interests.

They learn through handling, through problem solving, and I think it's very valuable.

Finally, a teacher shared:

I feel like not only should we worry about the standards but I feel like we need to develop a well-rounded citizen. I feel like play and social skills should be a big part of the classroom. Teaching them how to resolve conflict and take turns and have good sportsmanship. I guess really just being able to have those social cues and [be] a good tactful student.

However, also revealed in the data was the belief that administrative expectations were often a perceived barrier. As one teacher stated, "Upper administration is a challenge. One year they came in and simply took all of the toys out of the kindergarten classroom." While another teacher explained, "The greatest barrier is when administrators do not see the importance of play as an educational tool. Teachers are afraid to allow play because it may cause them to have poor evaluations." Similarly, some of the administrators echoed much of the concerns about administrative expectations acting as a barrier to using play in the classroom, as can be seen in the following response: "I'm a strong, strong advocate for academic focus, and so I am 100% guilty of pushing my teachers to focus more on academics, and I forget that the play piece is so important." Similarly, another administrator noted, "I can see the value of play regarding socialization, but the state has raised the expectations on standards, so I often put play out of the picture when discussing learning".

Q2 How does implementation of the kindergarten through third grade performance standards affect the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders?

Overall, from both the teachers and the administrators, the data revealed that there was much pressure from state standards, assessments, and data which became barriers to the use of play. As one administrator stressed, "Time constraints is a big role as to why play is reduced. Another is data, assessment, and expectations from multiple entities with rules and guidelines that vary." A teacher made it known that s/he also feels the pressure from state standards and the use of play, as s/he stressed,

When we focus on learning outcomes and place importance on rigid assessments, we remove from children the opportunity to learn according to their interest. We know, based on research, that when we provide children the opportunity to explore through play, more neural connections are created and the neural connections that result are much stronger.

Similarly, an administrator noted,

I think that by everything being so data-driven . . . which is understood by its purpose we're always looking for the data to support what we're doing. I think that gets in the way big time of play activities because I'm not certain how, you know, how you measure creativity. I don't know how you put a number on that.

One teacher agreed that many administrators and even teachers in lower elementary grades may not understand how play can equate to learning opportunities when stating,

Because of the increase in rigor and accountability in education these days, it is difficult for many of those who are not in direct contact on a day-to-day basis with our children to see the benefits

of play. They seem to believe that play is simply an act of ‘having fun’ and not a way in which our children can learn.

Other participants viewed that the standards pushed children beyond what they are developmentally capable, impacting competence and confidence. As one participant noted, “Competence is gained through self-initiated play, exploration, and teacher-guided practice. Seat work, as forced by implementation of standards-based curriculum, is not allowing natural development to occur in our children.” Likewise a teacher stated, “As kindergarten becomes more rigorous, so do the expectations of preschool. Because of the developmental differences between preschool and kindergarten children, preschool programs attempt to bridge the gap.” While another suggested,

So much has to be taught. Many do not believe there is time for play. Children are experiencing stress and have more behavioral problems because they are not allowed to move and explore their surrounding[s]. Preschools are what kindergarten used to be. Kindergarten is what first grade used to be.

With this said, there may be change on the horizon according to a teachers’ response. S/he noted that s/he feels that the pendulum is swinging back towards play. Interestingly enough, the interview participant responses were more mixed as to the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations and their perceived negative impact on play, as another teacher noted “I think it just depends on how the staff person was trained and what they believe.” Yet another teacher commented on whether the Missouri Learning Standards encourage or discourage the use of play as an educational tool in schools in the following statement:

Just from what I have heard and our collaborations, I would say go ahead and discourage it, because there’s not one standard in there that talks about social skills at all. I know there’s a listening and speaking standards and the ELA component, but I think it’s more like ‘Is the student listening to a teacher when given a direction?’, ‘Can they follow a brief set of directions?’ That kind of thing. I could be wrong, but I don’t think there’s any peer-to-peer play type anything.

And lastly, an administrator shared with the researchers that s/he felt the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations both encouraged and discouraged using play as an educational tool in the classroom. The administrator’s thoughts were as follows:

I think that if you read the standards themselves, I think if you just read them for what they are, I believe that they probably discourage play. But also as a district and as educators, it’s our job, I feel like, to figure out how to best teach the standards. The standards don’t tell us how to teach, they do tell us what to teach. So, I think as professionals, we have to research and figure out what’s best practice in order to get our students to master the standards. Who am I to tell a teacher that play is not a strategy that’s going to work to teach a certain standard?

4.1 Discussion

These findings confirm research regarding best practices for our young children. Combining these findings with earlier research such as that of Bailey (2001) and Taylor and Boyer (2020), we as a

society must remember that the use of play and other developmentally appropriate strategies in schools positively influence our educational system and the learning processes of children as recognized in the research. Thus, understanding how high stakes accountability is impacting the use of such an educational tool is important. Furthermore, children who are taught utilizing developmentally *inappropriate* methods are far less likely to achieve school readiness and overall educational success (Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005). In contrast, if we utilize methods that are developmentally appropriate, we nurture the whole child by allowing him/her to self-teach (Piaget, 1929; Vygotsky, 1962); solve problems (Bruner, 1996); express themselves in a healthy manner (Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005); and provide insight into his/her home life and prior experiences (Rivera, 2009). Figure 2 below synthesizes the concerns voiced by participants and how stakeholder perceptions regarding barriers impact play as a priority in the early childhood classroom.

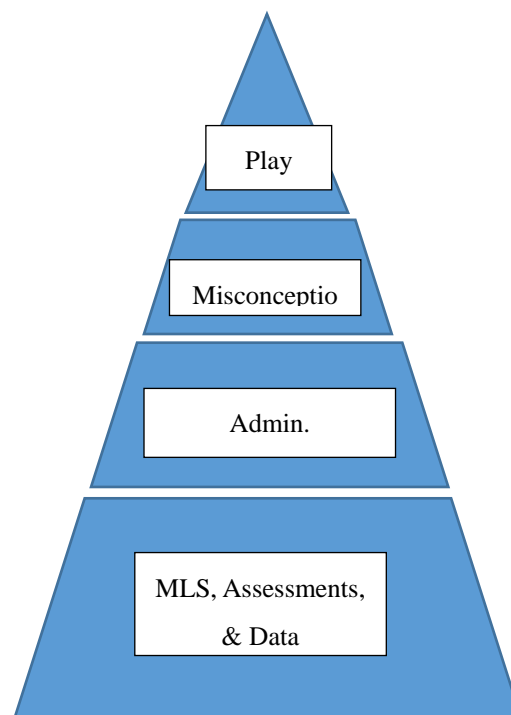


Figure 2. Priorities in Early Childhood based on Perceived Barriers.

5. Conclusions

Ultimately, in exploring stakeholder perceptions of play utilizing the lens of Piaget's (1929) constructivist learning theory (Schweinhart, 2005), this study implored participants to reflect upon their beliefs regarding play and the impact that high stakes accountability has had on the application of developmentally appropriate strategies in early childhood education. All teacher respondents believed that play is learning in one form or another. A majority of the responses referred to social-emotional skills that emerge from play opportunities, while there was a sizeable handful of responses that referred to more cognitive/academic skills. It can be concluded that educators see the value of play in early

childhood programs. Conversely, not all administrators were in agreement regarding the value of play. While many administrators noted that play was, at one time, important, the high stakes accountability factors were foremost in their minds. As they discussed what they needed in an early childhood classroom, many of them noted that, if something had to give, it would probably be the time spent in play in the classrooms. Unfortunately, the bulk of participants suggested that these perceived barriers reduce, or in some cases eliminate, the use of play as an educational tool in early childhood classrooms. Thus, it can also be concluded that, while teachers see the value of play, there are numerous barriers that do not allow play to be used as an educational tool. The data also suggested the conclusion that many participants did view the standards and the high stakes accountability expectations in kindergarten through third grade as negatively impacting the role of play in early childhood classroom settings. It is important to note there was a handful of respondents who suggested that, while the standards designate the expected outcomes, teachers and administrators willing to take the time to think outside of the instructional box will still find ways to incorporate elements of play into the daily routine as a means of learning.

6. Implications

As practitioners who acknowledge that play *is* in fact learning, there is a need to better advocate for developmentally appropriate practices, which, in the field of early childhood, includes the application of a constructivist learning approach and the incorporation of play into learning objectives. It is recommended that educational leaders prioritize play as an educational tool for its young children so that learning outcomes are achieved through best practice. Though data requirements will not be diminishing, state and school district stakeholders need to examine what data can be collected based on developmentally appropriate practices and, in conjunction with this, decipher how to translate that data in to improved early childhood instructional approaches and strategies. In addition, there is an educational opportunity to better inform early education stakeholders such as parents, administrators, policy-makers, and others as to the educational benefits of play and how play-based learning can lead to school readiness and academic achievement. Finally, policy-makers need to consider the incorporation of play-based learning standards so that our overarching educational goals and expectations are developmentally appropriate for our young children.

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