



## **VOICES FROM THE FIELD**

### **Learning Through Play: A View from the Field**

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#### ***Service perspective***

The summary of research on learning through play provided in the CEECD articles<sup>1-3</sup> and accompanying commentary by Howe<sup>4</sup> comes at a time when many play advocates believe that play is “under siege.”<sup>5</sup> It also comes at a time when many Canadian early childhood educators are striving to secure a pedagogical focus on play in the development and implementation of early learning curricula. These reviews provide a valuable foundation for interpreting the available evidence on *learning through play*, as well as raising more fundamental questions about the significance of play in early childhood.

For the past decade public attention in Canada has been focussed on the critical importance of early experience and ensuring that children, particularly disadvantaged children, are ready for school. The expansion in the provision of public early learning programs in Canada is one of a series of significant changes in both the social and physical environments in which early childhood unfolds in this country that is affecting young children’s opportunities for play. There is concern that the decline of opportunities for unstructured free play in the early years may be a contributing factor in rising childhood obesity levels, as well as increased levels of anxiety and stress in young children.<sup>6-8</sup>

#### **Play is becoming institutionalized in early childhood**

Young children are spending more time in early learning and child care environments at an earlier age, with the result that play is becoming “institutionalized.” As early childhood professionals experience increasing pressure to be accountable for learning as well as developmental outcomes, the long blocks of time devoted to free play in many early childhood programs are disappearing, crowded out by a focus on pre-academics as the foundation of school readiness. “Free play”—the kind of play that children control and direct themselves—happens in the leftover time, when there is nothing “more important” to do.

Reassuringly, “learning through play” is resurfacing in the lexicon of recent provincial early learning policy and curriculum documents.<sup>9-15</sup> These approaches however, tend to focus on play as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Howe reminds us that “we must not lose sight of the meaning and importance of free play for children.” What is

needed now is a renewed focus and accountability for ensuring that young children have adequate opportunities to play for the sake of play.

### **Gaps in the research**

The CEECD reviews<sup>1-3</sup> highlight the heterogeneity of the play phenomenon – with its multifaceted, paradoxical and ubiquitous qualities and multiple, overlapping classification schemes. Play describes such a wide range of behaviours that the question of a definition precise enough to support a research agenda continues to be problematic. The precise nature of the relationship between play and learning remains elusive. We are reminded that the existing evidence does not establish a clear cause and effect relationship between play and learning; it is suggestive rather than definitive. The state of evidence is fragmented and in some senses contradictory. Pellegrini and Smith<sup>3</sup> suggest that the significance of play in learning may be overstated; arguing that some of the key benefits derived from play may also be achievable in other ways. In contrast, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff<sup>2</sup> claim that “play is a critical ingredient in learning,” even, as the title suggests, that play = learning. From a different conceptual starting point Christie and Roskos<sup>1</sup> argue that play is “a highly engaging and meaningful context for learning,” a position that sounds more like the metaphor used by Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff in a previous work, that play is the “crucible” of learning.<sup>16</sup>

If one considers the child’s perspective, it’s easy to conclude that play and learning are not the same at all. Learning is generally speaking the by-product of children’s play, something that adults observe, but that is more or less unintentional, and often unimportant to the child. And although it is abundantly clear to adults that learning is embedded in play, the learning we observe is often not linear, nor is it efficient. In the words of noted play historian and philosopher Johan Huizinga, “play is a thing by itself.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Promising evidence**

Each of these authors agrees that the clearest evidence that children can learn while playing lies in the relationship between play – specifically sociodramatic play - and literacy. The most effective means of translating this finding into practice is not so clear. Christie and Roskos<sup>1</sup> report that creating literacy rich environments has been shown to be an effective strategy in achieving short term gains. The addition of environmental print as well as other innovative literacy props to children’s play environments has been a part of pre-service education of early childhood professionals for many years. The adult role as scaffolder in young children’s play is also familiar in professional practice; however there continue to be barriers to the widespread use of such strategies in the field. Early learning and child care programs in Canada do not have enough resources to support regular program planning and the kind of ongoing professional development needed to sustain best practice. Nonetheless, a clearer focus on the early literacy connections – and their relationship to language development and use – is both warranted and achievable in professional education and practice.

Neuroscientific research is beginning to reveal dimensions of play that might be more salient than originally thought. A recent multidisciplinary review of play research claims

that “playing is a way of building and shaping the emotion, motivation and reward regions of the brain.”<sup>18</sup> These findings suggest something beyond a functional, linear relationship between play and learning. Play may have a fundamental influence on children’s disposition towards learning – on the development of self regulation, executive function, flexibility, adaptability and resilience. These are exciting findings with significant implications for practice and for the education of early childhood professionals. A pedagogy of play might well have a broader focus than academic, cognitive learning.

Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff<sup>2</sup> reference the development of a new approach to curriculum called *Tools of the Mind*, based on the correlation between sociodramatic play and executive function. This work, while promising in some regards, is troubling in others. Its creators, Elena Bodrova and Deborah Leong observe, quite accurately, that many early childhood environments are chaotic – children don’t appear to be engaged in any sustained or meaningful kind of activity. *Tools of the Mind* is based on the assumption that children no longer know how to play, and it is systematically designed to teach them to engage in “mature, intentional” sociodramatic play. Yet we know that play is what children do spontaneously, typically much more skilfully than any adult, and even in situations of war and natural disaster. When adults step in to guide children’s play, the play is usually lost. Play is child directed – children learn to play from one another. Play is a resilient phenomenon. We must create the conditions that allow it to flourish.

### **A research agenda that informs policy and practice**

There is a clear commitment to play in policy and in practice, but the research agenda is unclear and unfocussed. What is most urgently needed is research that supports the translation of policy into practice, guided by research questions that inform practice. Before we can turn suggestive evidence into definitive evidence, there must be enough rich play happening to study its benefits to early learning.

Emerging questions include:

- What are the conditions that support sustained episodes of child directed free play in institutional settings such as child care and preschool programs? In particular, what are the conditions that allow sociodramatic play to flourish and develop in complexity, given its demonstrated impact on literacy, language and executive function?
- What is the impact of the institutional context on opportunities for different forms of play, e.g., outdoor play, rough and tumble play, solitary pretend play? How can the context be adapted to support the full range of play experiences?
- What is the impact of same age peer play-groups on the traditional child-child transmission of play culture?
- What are effective adult strategies to deepen and enrich children’s play, in particular the progressive development of sociodramatic play?

The nature of play demands longitudinal, interdisciplinary research. We need new theoretical frameworks for understanding the meaning of evidence gathered from

multiple perspectives of anthropology, sociology, developmental psychology, biology and neuroscience.

### **Implications for the education of early childhood professionals**

Sustained child directed play still occurs sporadically in some programs, but often seems to be the result of benign neglect rather than intentionality. Practice and pedagogy must be confident, consistent and intentional. If the clearest research evidence that children can learn through play is in the relationship between sociodramatic play and learning in several domains, it follows that early childhood educators need to know how to provide opportunities for progressive development of sustained episodes of rich sociodramatic play. Early childhood professionals must support play because they know it works. Adults need to know how to enter as well as exit the play context – to guide, facilitate and support – and then get out of the way.

Play is what children do. “There is indeed an argument that the right to play is the one that is most distinctly children’s; that it defines almost the right to be a child.”<sup>18</sup> Play must not be hijacked by an early learning agenda.

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