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A Continuum of Play-Based Learning: The Role of the Teacher in Play-Based Pedagogy and the Fear of Hijacking Play

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ABSTRACT

Research Findings: Research has demonstrated the developmental and educational benefits of play. Despite these benefits, teacher-directed academic instruction is prominent in kindergarten. There is increasing acknowledgment in curricula and policies of the challenges presented by a lack of play in classrooms and the need to support academic learning using developmentally appropriate practices. Current research emphasizes a narrow definition of play-based learning as a child-directed practice, resulting in teacher uncertainty about the implementation of this pedagogical approach. Fifteen kindergarten classrooms were examined using qualitative methodology, including observations and teacher interviews. Two different teacher profiles emerged: The 1st profile saw play and learning as separate constructs and reported challenges meeting academic demands using play-based learning. Their students primarily engaged in free play. The 2nd profile believed that play could support academic learning and that teachers fill an important role in play. Their students engaged in 5 different types of play, situated along a continuum from child directed to more teacher directed. *Practice or Policy:* The continuum of play-based learning provides a broader and more concrete definition of play-based learning to help teachers implement this pedagogical approach and to enhance the study of play-based learning in early years research.

Definitions and Perspectives of Play

In recent years, kindergarten classrooms have become more academically focused (Russell, 2011), with questions emerging regarding the educational and developmental benefits of play (Ashiabi, 2007). The current standards have become heavily focused on teaching academic skills as early as possible in order to maximize children's future academic success (Miller & Almon, 2009). This has led to an increased focus on teacher-directed academic instruction (Ashiabi, 2007; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013), with children taking on the role of passive recipients of knowledge (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). As a result, the length of time many kindergarten children spend in play is decreasing (Bergen, 2002; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Many researchers debate how to define the concept of children's play, and there continues to be disagreement regarding what human actions are included in this activity, why children engage in it, and how it impacts learning and development (Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012). Children's play has been described as freely chosen, actively engaging, opportunistic, pleasurable, creative, and concerned more with means than ends (Ashiabi, 2007; Sturges, 2003). Although many of these ideas lay the foundation for different conceptualizations of play, two different types of play have dominated the focus of current

research in education: children's pretend play (e.g., Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012) and adult-guided play (e.g., Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013).

The term *free play* is frequently used to describe play that is child directed, voluntary, and flexible and often involves pretend play, although it can refer to other types of play as well (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Newcombe, & Golinkoff, 2013; Holt, Lee, Millar, & Spence, 2015; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013). Studies that examine pretend play in children, or play that involves taking on different roles in pretend situations (Lindqvist, 2001), define this type of play as exclusively child directed (e.g., Bergen, 2002; Miller & Almon, 2009) and therefore a type of free play. However, some researchers have highlighted the vague nature of the concept of free play, as even spontaneous, child-led play is dependent on children's previous experiences (Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012), and children's interests tend to be introduced by adults rather than come from innate tendencies (Brooker, 2011).

Adult-guided play, in contrast, is described as lying "midway between direct instruction and free play" (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013, p. 104). In guided play, the activity can be either child initiated or adult initiated, but it is emphasized as a child-directed practice in which, just like in free play, the locus of control is placed with the child (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013). Children direct their own learning within the established play contexts while teachers enhance the learning experience by playing the role of commenters, coplayers, questioners, or demonstrators of new ways to interact with the materials involved (Fisher et al., 2013; Tsao, 2008; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013).

Play is often considered to be a child-led practice that is separate from learning, whereas learning is a result of teacher-led practices that are perceived to be of higher priority in a classroom setting (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Wood, 2010). However, some argue that this increased focus on direct instruction is developmentally inappropriate, because children are expected to learn academic content that may be beyond their developmental level in a manner that does not actively engage students. In addition, many believe that this teacher-directed focus is depriving children of stress-relieving play breaks (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009). Recent debates about early years pedagogy discuss the challenges faced by teachers as they choose between teaching academic content through direct instruction or allowing children time to engage in child-led play (Chien et al., 2010).

Although conceptualizing play and learning in a dichotomous manner is common, many researchers and professionals emphasize the notion that play is necessary for development and learning. Wallerstedt and Pramling (2012) argued that play and learning are inseparably tied in a child's early life and learning does not stop once a lesson is over. Research has shown that play can facilitate student learning by allowing children to build on and extend their previous knowledge and skills through interacting with others and/or the environment (Ashiabi, 2007). Indeed, a number of studies have shown that different types of play positively influence children's socioemotional development (e.g., Ashiabi, 2007) and academic learning (e.g., Weisberg, Zosh, et al., 2013), in some cases over and above direct instruction (Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010). Research on the benefits of play has influenced current curricular policies mandating the use of play-based learning practices in full-day kindergarten in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2011). Kindergarten teachers in Ontario are now faced with an academically focused curriculum with concurrent mandated play-based pedagogies, leaving them with the challenge of conceptualizing play-based learning and determining the role of play in the classroom (Pyle & Bigelow, 2014).

Tensions between academic and developmental perspectives toward learning and play have been reported over the years, with teachers revealing some discord between mandated standards and preferred instructional practices (e.g., Goldstein, 1997, 2007; Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). The concept of play-based learning (e.g., Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013) as recommended in the current Ontario curriculum presents a possible solution to these conflicting viewpoints. However, many issues remain, including the purpose of both play and learning and the role of teachers in students' play in kindergarten classrooms.

The Role of Play-based Learning

Play-based learning has been described as a teaching approach involving playful, child-directed elements along with some degree of adult guidance and scaffolded learning objectives (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013). In the early years, play-based learning practices have been shown to positively influence children's reading and math scores (Marcon, 2002; Stipek et al., 1998), and evidence suggests that overall this type of learning tends to be more effective than direct instruction (Han et al., 2010; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995) or free play (Chien et al., 2010; Honomichl & Chen, 2012). For instance, embedding literacy materials within play settings in kindergarten classrooms is related to children's increased engagement with these materials and the practice of literacy skills (e.g., Christie & Enz, 1992; Justice & Pullen, 2003; Stone & Christie, 1996), and teacher involvement in this play can enhance this engagement further (Clark & Kragler, 2005; Tsao, 2008). Research has demonstrated that in pretend play scenarios, in which children take on roles and negotiate the direction of play, children practice more advanced language skills (Bergen & Mauer, 2000; Weisberg, Zosh, et al., 2013).

In addition to the academic benefits of play, researchers have found a link between play and the development of social-emotional skills. For instance, pretend play has been found to support the development of self-regulation skills (e.g., Berk & Meyers, 2013; Elias & Berk, 2002), with private (or self-directed) speech serving as a potential mediating variable (Berk & Meyers, 2013). In addition, play-based learning pedagogies have been shown to benefit children's social skills (e.g., fewer internalizing and externalizing problems observed by teachers) and overall classroom experiences, including measures of teacher sensitivity and management of routines (Barnett et al., 2008). One type of curriculum that emphasizes the importance of teachers actively supporting the development of children's social play has been shown to significantly improve self-regulation skills as measured by accuracy on objective tests of inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility (Barnett et al., 2008; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munro, 2007). Although Lillard et al.'s (2013) review turned a critical eye toward the value of children's pretend play, adult-guided play was endorsed as the current best practice to support children's cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Teacher Role in Play-based Learning

Both in research and in practice, diverse viewpoints regarding the teacher's role in play have emerged. Teachers have reported differing beliefs about intervening in child-led activities (Hargreaves, Robson, Greenfield, & Fumoto, 2014). One perspective is that children's free play is beneficial for social and emotional development and should be preserved (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). In this conceptualization, play is often described as an activity that should not be interfered with by adults, in which the teacher's responsibility is "to support, not to disturb" (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006, p. 48) and to avoid contriving or "hijacking" the play (Goouch, 2008, p. 95). Consequently, teachers may oppose the idea of guiding play (Pyle & Bigelow, 2014).

An alternative perspective describes play as a chance for children to internalize and explore academic concepts, in which teacher involvement is seen as an opportunity to further children's learning and is encouraged (Pyle & Bigelow, 2014; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013; Weisberg, Zosh, et al., 2013). This type of play-based learning is effective because it actively engages the learner (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013), and this level of engagement can be maintained while implementing some teacher-directed elements. In addition, there is evidence that emphasizing play-based learning as a collaboration between students and teachers leads to positive academic results (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Although some researchers warn that when adults take control, the activities resemble "chocolate-covered broccoli" (Bruckman, 1999, p. 75), wherein work is merely disguised as play (Weisberg, Zosh, et al., 2013, p. 42), play-based learning strategies with some teacher-guided elements are not equal to the passive learning style of direct instruction. Although the degree of teacher involvement in play-based

learning practices can vary, with different elements (e.g., materials, environment, subject, roles) more or less teacher directed, effective play-based learning strategies are frequently emphasized as fundamentally child directed (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Gooch, 2008; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013; Weisberg, Zosh, et al., 2013). In light of this, researchers have begun to highlight the need to study different types of play and the potential benefits of play-based learning for child development and the acquisition of essential skills (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013).

Much of the current evidence points to child-directed pretend play as beneficial to socioemotional development (Ashiabi, 2007; Berk & Meyers, 2013), whereas more teacher-directed play is reportedly beneficial to the development of academic skills (Tsao, 2008). This dichotomization of play-based learning combined with the perspective of play and learning as distinct constructs in the classroom setting (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006) compound the challenges faced by teachers who report conflicts between mandated curricula and preferred instructional practices (e.g., Martlew et al., 2011). To facilitate the effective integration of play-based learning practices into kindergarten classrooms, this article aims to develop a broader and more concrete definition of play-based learning that synthesizes the roles and levels of involvement of teachers. This broadened definition will transgress the binary distinction between pretend play and learning and move toward conceptualizing play-based learning as a continuum in order to enhance both teachers' play-based pedagogies and the study of the benefits of these pedagogies in the early years.

Method

This research used a qualitative methodology including classroom observations and in-depth interviews with classroom teachers to explore the use of play-based learning in 15 public kindergarten classrooms in three school districts in Ontario, Canada. The province began the implementation of a full-day kindergarten program in 2010, and full implementation was completed in 2014. This program maintained the academic standards of the previous half-time kindergarten program while mandating a play-based pedagogical approach. In addition to academic standards, the curriculum document also contains a section describing the personal and social standards that students should achieve by the end of their kindergarten years. This blending of academic standards, personal and social learning, and a developmentally appropriate pedagogical approach makes Ontario the ideal setting in which to explore the role of play-based learning in an academic setting.

Participants

Three school districts were selected for participation in this study. The first school board was located in a suburban setting, the second in a large urban setting, and the third in a smaller urban area. Upon receipt of ethical clearance from the university and all three school districts, teachers were recruited who had diverse years of experience and were at different stages in the implementation of the kindergarten program (see Table 1). Seven of the teachers described attending school board in-services in which play-based learning was discussed though was not the sole focus, six of the teachers had no training in play-based learning, and two teachers described taking self-selected courses to further their knowledge of play-based learning in the classroom.

Data Collection

The full-day kindergarten program in Ontario was phased in over a 5-year period from 2010 to 2014. To capture the enactment of this program at multiple time points during this implementation, we collected data for this project in two phases over a 3-year period (Phase 1: 2012, Phase 2: 2014–2015). In Phase 1, between 56 and 70 hr of observational data in each of the three classrooms were recorded through field notes, photographs, and videos. In Phase 2, a minimum of 10 hr of observational data were recorded in each of the additional 12 classrooms through field notes, photographs, and videos.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

School District	Teacher	Year of Full-Day Kindergarten Implementation	Years of Teaching Experience
Suburban school district	Teacher 1	3	15
	Teacher 2	3	10
	Teacher 3	1	13
	Teacher 4	1	15
	Teacher 5	3	3
	Teacher 6	3	14
	Teacher 7	3	10
	Teacher 8	3	11
Large urban school district	Teacher 9	1	6
	Teacher 10	3	15
	Teacher 11	3	12
	Teacher 12	3	26
Small urban school district	Teacher 13	1	22
	Teacher 14	2	19
	Teacher 15	2	4

In all classrooms, the observations focused on the classroom environment; instructional periods (e.g., circle time); and periods of play, whether child led or teacher directed. These data were complemented by audio-recorded, semistructured interviews with the classroom teachers of approximately 60 min. These interviews queried teachers' perspectives on the purpose of play in a kindergarten classroom, the role of play in children's learning, and teachers' role in the play of the students in their classroom (i.e., What types of play do you think should occur in a kindergarten classroom? What aspects of student learning are enhanced by engaging in play? How do you support student learning during play?).

Data Analysis

Two researchers coded all data independently with an interrater reliability of 95%; the few discrepancies encountered were resolved through discussion. Data from Phase 1 were inductively analyzed on a class-by-class basis beginning with field note descriptions of play scenarios and photographs and videos of students engaged in play (Patton, 2002). Each play scenario was coded by the type of activity in which students were engaged, with a specific focus on the roles of the child and the adult in the play and the learning that occurred. Through this analysis, five categories of play emerged: learning through games, playful learning, collaboratively created play, inquiry play, and free play.

The results from Phase 1 were used to inform the coding of the data from Phase 2. Specifically, the field notes, photographs, and videos of children engaged in play were analyzed deductively to determine the consistency of the five categories of play. For instance, a video portraying students building rocket ships out of blocks and then pretending to fly the rockets was coded as free play. Throughout this analysis, we concurrently used an inductive analytic approach that provided the opportunity for the addition of further categories; however, no additional categories emerged.

Subsequently, teacher interviews from both studies were coded line by line using an inductive method based on data-driven codes (Patton, 2002). Using a method of constant comparison, we compared teacher codes across classes. This comparison resulted in four categories: purpose of play in a kindergarten classroom, learning in contexts of play, types of play that are implemented in kindergarten classrooms, and the teacher's role in children's play. Comparative analysis of these categories across teachers resulted in the emergence of two groups: The first group expressed a misalignment between play and academic learning ($n = 6$), and the second group described a clear connection between play and academic learning ($n = 9$). All three school boards were represented in both groups. The teachers' level of training in play-based learning was not related to their group assignment.

Results

Playing in the Kindergarten Classroom

Play is often defined in terms of the locus of control of the activity. In these terms, play occurs when children are in control, when their activities are freely chosen and without adult interference. Conversely, when adults direct the play, infusing external learning expectations, the activity is deemed “chocolate-covered broccoli” (Bruckman, 1999, p. 75). Six of the participating teachers reflected this ideology, sharing the perspective that play and academic learning are dichotomous constructs. These participants expounded the developmental appropriateness of play and primarily described the purpose of play as supporting the personal and social development of the children in their classes. This perspective complements the traditional view of kindergarten as introducing children to the institution of school and preparing them for the academic learning that is the focus of the later elementary grades (Elicker & Mathur, 1997). Institutional preparation of children focuses primarily on proper behavior within a school environment, which in kindergarten often revolves around learning to get along with others and socialize appropriately. For instance, one teacher clearly stated that during play students were learning to interact “socially, they’re figuring out how to act with their peers, what is acceptable and what is not acceptable” (Teacher 8). Another teacher mirrored this response, indicating that “the more they play, the more they learn. The more they play, the more they socialize. The more they play and engage, the more they learn how to work together” (Teacher 10). Preparation for academic learning, as it was described by these participants, primarily involved the ability to focus and function independently in a classroom environment. These self-regulatory benefits of play were clearly articulated by Teacher 1, who stated that “self-regulation is a big one for this age group ... and becoming independent and really thinking for themselves and problem solving is huge.” This perspective of play as integral to student preparation for future learning was accompanied by the perspective that play supported the development of skills that support academic learning but not academic learning in and of itself.

These six teachers described the learning of academic skills primarily in didactic terms, emphasizing that the learning of academic concepts required direct teacher instruction and that this instruction did not occur in the context of play:

I don’t expect my phonemic awareness study that we do in our morning message and building words and playing with sounds and all that we do for 5 minutes every morning is going to happen at the centers. I don’t really think that they’re going to be like, “Oh phone /f/ /f/ oh it makes that sound.” No it’s not. (Teacher 15)

Other teachers shared this perspective, stating that trying to find a balance between the academic expectations of the kindergarten curriculum and the play-based pedagogical approach that is mandated in Ontario kindergarten classrooms presented a continuous challenge:

I found that to be really tough because it doesn’t really come naturally in play. I find it really hard to mesh the play and the literacy, and I find that most of their literacy skills come from the small-group work that I do. (Teacher 1)

Although all of these participants were committed to the integration of play into their programs, and we observed play regularly during data collection, there was little variation in the types of play in which students were engaged.

In total, we observed 227 play episodes in these six classrooms, and 86% of these episodes were free play. This percentage of free play was consistent across all classes ($SD = 9.9$). The most common type of free play observed in all six classrooms was building (e.g., big blocks, Lego), playing with toys (e.g., cars, dinosaurs) was the second most common type of play observed, and the third most common was sensory play (e.g., water and sand tables, Play-Doh). Free play episodes were entirely child directed, with no involvement of the teacher through the construction of the play environment (excluding the provision of resources), the guiding of play, or the extension of play episodes through questioning and/or feedback.

When asked to describe the types of play that occurred within their classrooms, teachers in this group focused their responses on the resources that were available for children's play: "You'd see children playing with sensory materials, we have goop, play dough, sand ... we might have a water table. They build with blocks and Lego" (Teacher 1). In addition, their responses focused on the importance of the child-directed nature of play: "You have to follow what they're interested in" (Teacher 10). The importance of following the child's lead in play was communicated in terms of their expressed purposes of play: to foster independence and self-motivated learning. "If I didn't have this free flow and I'm always dictating what they're doing, I feel that they wouldn't have that confidence to try to learn on their own" (Teacher 11). Other teachers in this group shared this type of concern, expressing the belief that teachers should limit their involvement in children's play: "By suggesting that we move away from play to purposeful play it almost gives an adult control or an adult-directed tone to play and I'm not sure that is where we want to go" (Teacher 13).

The belief that teachers should remain largely uninvolved in children's play led to several challenges that were communicated by these six teachers. The most prominent challenge communicated by these teachers was their expressed belief in the need to create a child-directed program while still integrating the mandated curricular standards. The child-directed nature of these classrooms led to issues in planning learning opportunities for students:

It is not planned out. It is a day-to-day basis. That is what I find so hard in this program. You can't plan for the week. You can have ideas and think, "Okay, we can do this and this and this," but it is really the kids that are driving it so it is really a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants kind of thing. (Teacher 1)

This perceived inability to plan led teachers to question the integration of play-based pedagogy, not because they did not value play but because they struggled to negotiate a balance between the child-directed play they felt was essential and the mandated academic standards:

The big question is that knowing that children absolutely need these [literacy] skills before they leave or else there is not a lot of catch time, if any, how do we make sure that happens while we are taking their lead? (Teacher 13)

Another teacher took this concern further, describing her concern that children should not be expected to inherently integrate this learning into their play: "We are leaving too much to the kids and I think at this age, not a lot of the kids are ready" (Teacher 11).

In these six classrooms, play was dichotomized from academic learning. An activity was defined as play only when it was directed by children and was exempt from adult interference. The learning of academic skills occurred through teacher-directed learning opportunities (e.g., small-group or whole-class instruction). Because they perceived play to be a child-directed construct and they expressed the belief that children did not naturally integrate the necessary academic learning into their play, these teachers struggled to negotiate the necessary balance between a play-based pedagogical approach and the prescribed academic standards. Although they integrated play into their classrooms, the expressed dichotomization of play and academic learning meant they did not integrate the play-based learning pedagogical approach that is mandated by the Ministry of Education in Ontario.

Play-based Learning in the Kindergarten Classroom

The teachers in nine of the participating classrooms communicated their perspectives concerning both the developmental and the educative values of play. These teachers embraced a holistic perspective of play, stating that play in a classroom environment "gives them the opportunity to grow physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively" (Participant 12). These teachers embraced play both as its own developmentally appropriate activity and as a pedagogical tool that had the potential to support children's learning of academic skills. Play was described as a valuable learning activity in and of itself that gave children the "freedom to explore, to make mistakes, to investigate,

to try trial and error. They are doing that on their own terms and knowing they are in a supportive environment” (Participant 2). Opportunities for this traditional child-directed play existed concurrently with play that acted as a support to traditional didactic instructional strategies:

Play is extremely important but it’s a chance for them to practice the skills that they’ve been taught. When the direct teaching happens and then they’re allowed to play and explore and change things up within their play, their play changes. It gives them a chance to process, to ask questions about that, to share their knowledge with other people and feel really good about themselves, and with all that happening through play it comes out in the ways that they are most comfortable. (Participant 14)

The teachers in this group clearly described the intentionality needed in embracing this particular aspect of a play-based pedagogical approach. They shared the perspective that ensuring a connection between direct instruction and children’s play was important to supporting children’s true understanding of academic concepts:

Sitting in a big circle is a good way to introduce something, but they will go away and start doing something else and it will be gone. You have to figure out how to connect it and give them ownership. (Participant 7)

In addition to providing the opportunity to support children’s internalization of concepts, play contexts provided motivation to learn these concepts, especially when that knowledge would allow them to extend the narrative of their play: “It’s motivating for them. Look at our doctor’s office, they wanted to write the words and they understand that signs have meaning and people read them and it indicates certain things” (Participant 3). For many of these participants play presented the opportunity to connect play and academic instruction; however, this connection did not occur in an entirely independent manner. Teachers played an important role in this play-based learning.

The role that these teachers played existed along a continuum from silent and noninterfering observer to creator of playful contexts designed to promote the learning of specific academic standards. Some play periods were entirely child directed, with children selecting both the resources to be used and the narrative of the play. These teachers understood and respected children’s need to play freely, in an uninterrupted manner:

I try not to step over the play but try to get in there and add those little provocations and those little questions to keep it going. Sometimes it works out and other times they are like, “Go away you are ruining our cars.” It is figuring out which time is the best to approach. (Participant 7)

During these periods of child-directed play, teachers intentionally considered their level of engagement, determining when to remain a silent observer and when to act on an opportunity to extend children’s learning. As these teachers embraced a pedagogy of play-based learning, as opposed to strictly providing opportunities for play in the kindergarten classroom, they worked to negotiate a balance between guiding and extending children’s play to support their learning and allowing children to play independently:

The play-based part is to be there to help them when they ask that question, to help give them the tools to explore it that much further, and to ask them the tough questions to make them conscious learners as to how they are going to get that information. (Participant 14)

Although all nine teachers considered questioning and extending productive strategies, there was consistent concern that children would not learn all of the necessary skills if teachers attempted to integrate these standards only when they emerged naturally from children’s play. As a result these teachers communicated the challenge of “trying to find that balance of what they are interested in, and what do I want to make sure I’m covering in the curriculum” (Participant 4). To facilitate the integration of children’s interests and the academic learning that was mandated by curricular standards, all of these teachers worked to collaboratively create contexts of play with their students: “trying to build on things that they are expressing an interest in” (Participant 9). This strategy was described as effective by all of the nine teachers; however, there were still consistent discussions concerning how to facilitate this learning in students who were not naturally inclined to integrate

academic skills into their play. In these instances, the teachers discussed teacher-directed contexts of playful learning that allowed children to develop the necessary skills in an engaging and playful manner: “Stella loves going to that center with the alphabet chart and stuff, whereas Lucy wants nothing to do with it yet, so we make it into a game” (Participant 7). The continuum of teacher involvement in play in these nine classrooms meant that not only did teachers take on varying roles but there was also greater variation in the types of play in which children engaged (see [Figure 1](#)).

Free Play

Much like in the previous group of classrooms, free play was the dominant type of play observed. Of the 394 episodes of play observed in these classrooms 60% were free play ($SD = 15.7$). During episodes of free play, the children directed their own play narratives and determined the resources to be used. There was little to no teacher involvement in the structure of the play. The most common type of free play observed was building; the second most common was playing with toys such as dinosaurs and vehicles; and the third most common was the use of sensory materials such as sand, water, and Play-Doh. Though free play continued to dominate as the most frequent type of play, the percentage of time spent in free play was 25% lower in these classes than the 86% of time spent in free play in the first group of classes, though the number of play episodes did not diminish. That is, a comparable amount of time was spent in play in both groups of classrooms, but the play-based learning classrooms had more variation in the types of play observed.

Inquiry Play

Similar to free play, in inquiry play the locus of control remained largely with the child. This type of play was child initiated, and, in response to child interests, teachers extended the play through the integration of related academic standards. For instance, during one of our observations in Classroom 14 a paper airplane flew right into the middle of a guided reading lesson. Rather than dissuading this activity, the teacher helped the pair of students create a runway where paper airplanes could be thrown safely and without interrupting the activities of others. As other children watched this pair of boys throwing their airplanes, they began to construct and fly their own. The teacher embraced this common interest and brought in books about airplanes, including some that contained instructions for building far more complicated paper aircrafts. The children began to vary the styles of their airplanes, testing which would fly farther. The teacher then introduced both standard and non-standard measurement tools so that children could determine how far their planes could fly. Along with this knowledge, concern grew over how to keep the folds of their airplanes from coming apart during flight. At this point, the teacher introduced the scientific method, suggesting that they test out different adherents (e.g., tape, glue, staples) to determine which would facilitate the farthest flight. This type of play is explicitly discussed in the Ontario full-day kindergarten program document

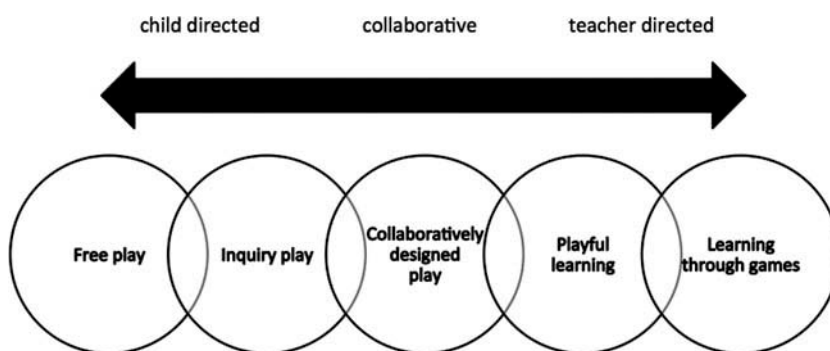


Figure 1. Continuum of play-based learning.

(OME, 2011), which contains a section titled “Play-Based Learning, Learning Through Inquiry” that states that teachers should “use inquiry-based learning to build on children’s spontaneous desire for exploration and to gradually guide them to become more focused and systematic in their observations and investigations” (p. 15). All nine of the teachers discussed the use of inquiry play in their classrooms, describing the importance of extending children’s interests by providing opportunities for “them to find something and then me looking at the curriculum and saying, ‘Okay, what curriculum expectations could I get out of it?’” (Participant 9). However, we only observed this type of play in five classrooms. This discrepancy is perhaps best explained by one of the participating teachers, who thoughtfully echoed the descriptions of the challenges inherent in inquiry play of the other participants:

The Ministry’s full-day play-based inquiry model and go with the kids direction and yet I have the curriculum and the principal wants to see my learning goals and success criteria on the wall. It’s hard to see what their picture is that they want in my classroom. They seem to be conflicting points of view to some degree. (Participant 14)

Although many of the teachers expressed similar challenges with inquiry play, all nine classrooms implemented collaborative play.

Collaborative Play

In collaborative play there is a shared locus of control. Teachers direct the outcomes of this play by determining the academic skills that students will develop. The teacher and students collaboratively design the context of the play, including both the theme and the resources necessary to the play. The children then direct the play within the created environment. For instance, in one classroom we observed the creation of a veterinary clinic. The children’s interest in animals was the inspiration for the creation of this context of play, which began as a pet shop and then transformed into a veterinary clinic. The class

suggested it and thought about what things we needed to put in it ... then we had a secondary discussion about what it is looking like and what we are liking about the pet shop and what we are not liking about it. Then we added the medical component, the vet part. (Participant 6)

During our observations, students played at this center during every playtime. They were observed waiting with their “pets” in the waiting room, acting as the veterinarians who used medical equipment (e.g., stethoscopes, masks, play needles), and acting as receptionists who booked appointments for the animals. The integration of a number of academic skills was observed at the veterinary clinic: the reading of books to inform proper treatment of the pets’ injuries or illnesses, the writing of instructions by veterinarians for pet parents, and the recording of appointments by receptionists. The teacher provided guidance concerning these skills as extensions to children’s play. For instance, a group of children were trying to determine whether an animal had broken its leg. The teacher joined this conversation and introduced the concept of an x-ray machine. She assisted as the students did some research about x-ray machines on a tablet and then provided the materials necessary for children to build their own. The students subsequently drew bones from actual x-ray images and labeled the machine and x-rays to ensure proper use by the other students. This collaboratively created context of play provided opportunities for both child-directed play narratives accompanied by natural opportunities for the teacher to integrate academic skills. Although the veterinary clinic primarily provided the opportunity for the development of literacy skills, other observed collaboratively created contexts of play supported the development of other academic skills. For instance, in Class 2 they created a haunted house where ticket sales provided opportunities to learn math concepts, including coin identification, making change, addition, and subtraction.

Playful Learning

The integration of academic skills into collaboratively created contexts of play was possible and expertly accomplished in these nine classrooms; however, there were skills that students were expected to learn that did not naturally present themselves during play. To integrate these skills, teachers communicated the need for a more structured approach: playful learning. This approach was intended to support the learning of targeted academic skills in a manner that was playful and engaging for the students:

It's doing it in a way that they don't realize they're being taught and that they're learning. They just think they're playing. They just think they're having fun. They're not realizing the math they're getting and the language they're getting. (Participant 2)

In all nine classrooms, we observed playful learning episodes with teacher-directed academic outcomes in which the children still influenced the play narrative. For instance, in Class 12 the teacher created a flower shop. The teacher constructed order forms and children filled out the four sections (flower type, flower color, extras like balloons, and the total cost) before submitting it to the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper, whose role also included writing the amounts on each type of flower so the customers could use this information on their order forms, then processed and filled customers' orders. These were prescribed activities within this context of play that provided practice with math and literacy concepts that were part of the whole-class instruction. However, children also maintained control over some aspects of the play, including requesting flowers for the event of their choosing. One group of students requested flowers for a picnic: They purchased their arrangement according to the prescribed instructions and then played out the picnic event, enjoying their play food with their flowers as the centerpiece.

Learning through Games

The final and most prescriptive type of play-based learning is learning through games. This type of play was implemented in all nine classrooms to promote the development of discrete math and language skills. In this manner, teachers sought to make the learning of these mandated academic standards more engaging for the students: "There are always some academic things that we have to deal with too. We do try to make it engaging" (Participant 3). One of the ways in which these teachers promoted this engagement was through the playing of games. "Because then it is a game. We are not learning. We are playing" (Participant 7). In these play episodes the teacher directed the outcomes and prescribed the process while the children followed the rules of the games. For instance, the students in Class 5 played Words With Friends, a game that involved using letter tiles to spell words and names on a game board. Students in Classes 6 and 9 played word and letter bingo, whereas in Classes 12 and 14 the students went fishing for letters with their magnetic fishing poles. Math games were also prevalent in several of the classrooms. Class 2 played Go Fish with number cards, whereas in Class 12 students used Play-Doh to make the assigned number of worms and place them in the scene on themed placemats.

In these nine classrooms, multiple types of play were integrated. These variations of play provided the opportunity for both play and play-based learning. The play episodes were child directed and free from the confines of academic standards. The play-based learning activities involved varying levels of teacher involvement and integrated varying degrees of academic learning.

Discussion

The amount of time kindergarten children spend in play is decreasing in favor of more direct academic instruction in small and large groups (Bergen, 2002; Miller & Almon, 2009). However, this solution to the problem of optimizing young children's learning in an academically focused curriculum is considered developmentally inappropriate because of the lack of active engagement in direct instruction (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009). Rather than decreasing the

amount of time children spend in play in favor of explicitly teaching prescribed academic skills, perspectives on the role of play in learning can change, with opportunities to support children's social, emotional, and academic development within the context of play-based learning.

In the current study, 15 classrooms were examined and two different pedagogical philosophies emerged. Six teachers shared the perspective that play and learning are dichotomous constructs. These teachers saw play as an activity engaged in without adult interference, which positively influences children's personal and social development. These teachers commented on the challenges present in finding a balance between meeting academic demands and following a play-based learning approach. Concerns emerged regarding adult involvement in play but also regarding how to teach curricular expectations in a child-led environment. When teachers endorsed the idea that play-based learning is fundamentally a child-directed activity (e.g., Berk & Meyers, 2013; Gooch, 2008; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013; Weisberg, Zosh, et al., 2013), it follows that teachers felt concern over meeting academic standards without imparting direction during times of play. When play and learning become a dichotomy, learning is restricted to small- and large-group direct instruction while play is limited to child-directed free play.

Alternatively, nine teachers saw play as both a developmentally appropriate activity and one that could support the learning of academic skills beyond direct instruction by helping to internalize newly taught concepts in a motivating context. These teachers endorsed the view that they occupy an important role in children's play. These nine classrooms demonstrated approximately the same amount of time spent in play as the other six classrooms; however, they demonstrated more variation in the types of play observed. These teachers supported times of uninterrupted child-led play (free play) along with times for guiding and extending children's play through following children's lead and expanding on their interests (inquiry play), creating contexts of play together (collaborative play), setting up prescribed activities that contained playful elements (playful learning), and constructing games with explicit rules for the children to follow (learning through games). These teachers discussed the importance of extending child-led play scenarios in order to facilitate the teaching of academic skills but also the importance of creating play contexts with the children and even directing some play contexts so that children not naturally inclined to integrate academic skills into play could be presented with opportunities to learn in a fun and engaging manner.

Although there is general agreement that play belongs in the kindergarten classroom, what this play consists of is a contentious issue among teachers and researchers alike. The role of play in the classroom is often discussed in terms of its relationship to educational purpose. When the purpose of kindergarten is considered to be social in nature and child-directedness is the focus, free play is advocated. However, when the purpose of schooling is the introduction of a targeted set of skills, more structured play is considered more appropriate (Kuschnir, 2015). Given the standards-based curricula that are currently implemented in kindergarten classrooms, the mandated purpose clearly aligns with the latter belief, and thus a broader conception of classroom-based play is warranted. However, to acknowledge the value of child-directed free play to children's social and self-regulatory development (Barnett et al., 2008; Berk & Meyers, 2013), the proposed continuum preserves this type of play while integrating teacher-involved play-based learning. This broadened perspective not only aligns with current policy but also aligns with and makes more concrete the position of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) that describes the need for the integration of varying types of play within a classroom environment (NAEYC, 2009).

Play Versus Play-based Learning

When we examined questions regarding the purpose of play and learning in the kindergarten classroom, a distinction emerged between the concepts of play and play-based learning. The purpose of play-based learning is inherent in its name: to learn while at play. The purpose of play, in contrast, is far more open ended and frequently the topic of debate. What purpose it serves, including why children engage in it and what activities it includes, continues to be a point of contention among

researchers (Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012). However, it is frequently described as pleasurable, actively engaging, and concerned more with means than ends (Ashiabi, 2007; Sturgess, 2003). Learning does not need to occur in order for an activity to be seen as play; hence, play-based learning and play are distinct constructs.

Although researchers continue to debate the exact definition of play, it is emphasized by teachers and researchers alike as a child-directed practice (Fisher et al., 2013; Holt et al., 2015; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013). Once an adult gets involved, it is not seen as pure free play anymore. It is clear that in these 15 classrooms, child-directed free play is an important component of kindergarten that is not limited by academic standards, with connections being drawn for teachers to social and emotional benefits. However, with play-based learning as a mandate in full-day kindergarten in Ontario and the oft-discussed need to integrate more play into early years classrooms (Miller & Almon, 2009), researchers need to expand beyond the concept of free play and examine the ways in which teachers can direct, collaborate with, or extend the child's lead during times of play in the classroom in order to facilitate academic learning. The broadened definition of play-based learning afforded by the continuum moves beyond the binary distinction between play and learning and incorporates varying levels of adult involvement that can support the teaching of academic skills in a playful manner. As it is conceptually broader than free play alone, play-based learning does not need to be emphasized as fundamentally child directed (e.g., Berk & Meyers, 2013; Gooch, 2008; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013; Weisberg, Zosh, et al., 2013), which may alleviate concerns teachers have expressed regarding its implementation in the classroom.

Although all nine teachers who expressed the belief that academic skills can be taught through play discussed the use of inquiry play, only five classrooms actually demonstrated this type of play during the observational period. Inquiry play is explicitly recommended in the Ontario full-day kindergarten program document (OME, 2011) as an important play-based learning strategy. Current research on adult-guided play, emphasized as a child-led practice (e.g., Berk & Meyers, 2013; Gooch, 2008; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013; Weisberg, Zosh, et al., 2013), tends to restrict the definition of play-based learning to inquiry play. Brooker (2011) stated that what is most effective for kindergarten-age children is "supported play and instruction based on children's observed interests" (p. 139). However, our participants commented on the challenge of meeting explicit learning goals from the curriculum through building on the children's interests and following their lead. All other types of play on the continuum were observed more frequently than inquiry play, highlighting the need to expand the definition of play-based learning beyond inquiry play alone, along with the potential need for further guidance and practical knowledge for kindergarten teachers on implementing inquiry play in the classroom.

Child-centeredness Versus Child-directedness

Teachers from six of the examined classrooms shared the perspective that play should be child directed in order to foster important personal and social skills and that academic learning is separate from play. Policy documents (e.g., NAEYC, 2009) discuss the importance of teaching being child centered, meaning that it considers children's development, interests, and abilities. This concept is distinct from the idea of an activity being child directed. The presented play-based continuum is entirely child centered, emphasizing the importance of teaching academic concepts in an engaging and developmentally appropriate manner, expanding on children's interests, and utilizing play-based strategies that match children's abilities. However, not all types of play on the continuum are child directed, and a distinction needs to be made between these two concepts. An activity that contains teacher-directed elements can be child centered in nature. Teachers who mainly endorsed one type of play in the classroom, free play, believed that play should be child directed but expressed concern regarding what can be taught in a child-led manner. By emphasizing the need to honor children and their developmental needs (child-centeredness) rather than emphasizing the locus of control (child-directedness), classrooms can integrate both play and play-based learning, allowing teachers to

provide the guidance necessary to extend children's learning in an engaging, play-based manner. In order for play-based learning to be implemented effectively, teachers and researchers need to shift away from the perspective that the teacher's role is "to support, not to disturb" (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006, p. 48) and to avoid "hijacking" play (Goouch, 2008, p. 95). Play-based learning practices have been shown to positively influence children's learning of academic concepts more so than direct instruction (Han et al., 2010; Stipek et al., 1995) or free play alone (Chien et al., 2010; Honomichl & Chen, 2012). If the end goal is to teach children the fundamental academic skills included in the current curriculum, doing so through this broader view of play-based learning is an engaging and developmentally appropriate manner of teaching for kindergarten-age children. However, every mandated shift in pedagogical focus provides a challenge to teachers, who are required to adjust their classroom practices. The adjustment required by the implementation of play-based learning, especially for those teachers who currently strictly view play as a context for the development of personal and social skills, is dramatic. The training in the use of play in kindergarten classrooms described by the participating teachers is minimal, and thus the challenges faced by these teachers are plentiful. Increased training in a broader interpretation of play-based learning and practical methods for its enactment would benefit teachers' implementation of this approach.

Conclusion

The new mandate for kindergarten classrooms in Ontario includes teaching academic concepts through play-based learning. Restricting views on play and learning to direct instruction versus free play, with a type of adult-guided play emphasized as child led somewhere in the middle, is too restrictive to encompass different play-based learning strategies used by teachers in the classroom. Child-directed play, collaboratively created play, and teacher-directed play all present important opportunities for personal, social, and academic growth. However, teachers' views regarding if and when they should intervene during play continue to be diverse, and some teachers almost exclusively demonstrated one type of play in their classrooms: free play. It is hoped that this continuum, with a broader and more concrete definition of play-based learning, will help to enhance the practice of play-based learning pedagogies for kindergarten teachers and the study of their benefits in the early years.

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