A MANDATE FOR PLAYFUL LEARNING

Framing the definitions and the evidence

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THE CAPULETS AND MONTAGUES OF EARLY EDUCATION: WARRING FACTIONS OR COMPATIBLE APPROACHES?

Direct instruction (vs or via) playful learning

Confounding issues of curricula and pedagogy
THE CASE FOR A CORE CURRICULUM

Foundational academic and social skills are critical for school success!

- Early cognitive skills in language, preliteracy, numeracy, executive function and emotion regulation predict later elementary school achievements.
  - NICHD, Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Scarborough, 2001; Storch & Whitehurst, 2001; NELP Report, 2009; Dickinson & Freiberg, in press; Baroody & Dowker, 2003; Raver, 2002

- Interventions in these skills make a big difference in later outcomes -- they are malleable
  - Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munro, 2007

- Interventions have have both short and long term effects on outcomes.
  - Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, & Ramey, 2001; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Campbell & Ramey, 1995; Schweinhart, 2004; Weikart, 1998; Reynolds, Ou, & Topitzes, 2004; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006
PLAYFUL LEARNING:
STRONG CONTENT VIA PLAYFUL PEDAGOGY

• Free play
  • whether with objects, fantasy and make believe, or physical, is
    1) pleasurable and enjoyable, 2) has no extrinsic goals, 3) is
    spontaneous, 4) involves active engagement, 5) is generally all-
    engrossing, 6) often has a private reality, 7) is non-literal, and 8)
    can contain a certain element of make-believe (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009;
    Garvey, 1977; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003; Christie & Johnsen, 1983).

• Guided play
  • educators structure an environment around a general curricular
    goal that is designed to stimulate children’s natural curiosity,
    exploration, and play with learning-oriented objects/materials
    (Fein & Rivkin, 1986; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Marcon, 2002; Resnick, 1999; Schweinhart, 2004)
Guided play is always child directed:
- Adults populate environment for child discovery
- Adults gently guide and comment on or reinforce child action and discovery (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, in press)

Guided play vs directed “play”: Playful learning lies on a continuum (Miller & Almon, 2009)
Dimensions of Early Learning Contexts

- Planned Learning
  - Direct Instruction
  - Guided Play
- Spontaneous Learning
  - Directed “Play”
  - Teachable Moments
  - Free Play

• From free play
  • Math and science
    • Sarama & Clements, 2009a, 2009b; Tamis-LeMonda, Uzgiris, & Bornstein, 2002; Ginsburg, Pappas, and Seo, 2001
  • Literacy and language
    • Dickinson, Cote, & Smith, 1993; Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer, 2006; Pellegrini & Galda, 1990; Dickinson & Moreton, 1991; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Bergen & Mauer, 2000
  • Social-emotional skills
    • Birch & Ladd, 1997; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997
  • Executive function

• From guided play
  • Math
    • Arnold, Fisher, Ginsburg, Inoue, & Seo, 1999; Doctoroff, & Dobbs, 2002; Griffin & Case, 1996; Griffin, Case, & Siegler, 1994; Whyte & Bull, 2008; Clements & Sarama, 2007; Fisher, 2009; Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006
  • Literacy and language
    • Christie & Enz, 1992; Christi & Roskos, 2006; Einarsdottir, 2000; Kavanaugh & Engel, 1998; Roskos & Christie, 2004; Saracho & Spodek, 2006; Nicolopoulou et al. 2006; Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006
  • Social-emotional skills
    • Brackett, Rivers & Salovey, in press; Ashiabi , 2007); Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006; Burts et al., 1990; Burts et al., 1992; Hirsh-Pasek, 1991; Love, Ryer, & Faddeis, 1992
  • Executive function
    • Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munroe, 2007; Blair & Razza, 2007; Duncan, Dowsett, Claessens, Magnuson, Huston, Klebanov, et al., 2007; Gathercole, Tiffany, Briscoe, Thorn, & ALSPAC Team, 2005; Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006

Though some studies use random assignment, most of the data are from correlational and observational studies.
Why might playful learning work as a pedagogical tool?

• Consistent with well worn developmental principles of how children learn
  • Active not passive
  • Meaningful context
  • Whole child approach to learning

• Naturally uses mechanisms that foster strong learning
  • Interest
  • Engagement
  • Intrinsic motivation and autonomy
  • Attention
KEY POINTS AND DIRECTIONS FORWARD

- A strong core curriculum and playful pedagogy are NOT incompatible.
- Data suggest playful learning offers a midground position to foster high quality preschool education.
- We need more research to secure the operational definition of playful learning and guided play.
- We need more high quality research to examine the impact of playful learning on academic and social outcomes.
  - Random assignment studies comparing playful learning to free play alone and to direct instruction.
- We need research that goes beyond the claim for an association and that looks at the **mechanisms** that drive the association between play and learning.