

Annotated Bibliography on the Place for Play in Early Childhood Education

EDN 500

Jessica Redford

UNC Wilmington

Problem Statement:

From birth, children learn about the world in which they live through rich real life experiences and playful imitation and exploration, yet increasingly PreK and Kindergarten programs favor the use of teacher lead instruction, standardized assessments, and a primary focus on academic/ cognitive achievement goals. Are school programs that emphasize play, playful learning, and open ended explorative experiences producing children with higher or lower rates of mastery in areas such as cognitive, physical, and social/emotional development in the long run?

Resources:

Source 1

Bodrova, E. (2008). Make-believe play versus academic skills: A Vygotskian approach to today's dilemma of early childhood education. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 16(3), 357-369, DOI: 10.1080/13502930802291777. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13502930802291777?src=recsys>

Bodrova considers what place the playful experiences of early childhood continue to hold in a world that increasingly values academic achievement at earlier and earlier ages, regardless of any indicators that such achievements hold up over time (and in the face of evidence that connects this moment to detrimental effects in social and emotional growth). Bodrova proposes the use of a Vygotskian approach to instruction, which enhances and expands the child's own skills and interests to support the development of language skills, reasoning, abstract thought, social minded-

ness, and self regulation through mature make-believe play. In conclusion, Bandrova also discusses the need for teacher guidance to develop the mature play skills of their students, to aid them to extend beyond roles and games dictated by imagination limiting props and commercial play scenarios, as well as sufficient lengths of unstructured time for the true benefits of play to be realized.

This article contributed to the development of my problem statement by helping to bridge the divide between academic and developmental theories of early childhood to make use of the intrinsic motivation of young children at play to support growth. Though make-believe play is the central focus of discussion, Bodrova suggests that through utilizing a Vygotskian approach to guiding and supporting young learners' own playful experiences, important cognitive, social, behavioral, and emotional gains can be intentionally realized which surpass what young learners are capable of achieving when solely tasked with attending to direct instruction.

Source 2

Farran, D., & Lipsey, M. (2015). Expectations of sustained effects from scaled up pre-K: Challenges from the Tennessee study. *Evidence Speaks Reports*, 1(4), 1-7. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Expectations-of-sustained-effects-from-scaled-up-preK-Tennessee-study_4.pdf

The "Tennessee Study" follows in the footsteps of several well known longitudinal studies on the effects of Preschool education on learning outcomes such as the Perry Study and the Abecedarian Project. Designed to follow the progress of the initial graduates of the large scale Tennessee

Voluntary PreK program (TNVPK), the Tennessee Study found negative returns for children enrolled in TNVPK compared to the control group who did not receive a spot in the program due to its lottery based enrollment (and who were largely homeschooled in their PreK years as a result). Though TNVPK graduates demonstrated significant cognitive gains on a variety of subject tests at the end of the program (compared to the control group), by the end of their Kindergarten year these gains had largely disappeared, by 1st grade TNVPK graduates were rated as being less prepared for school and more negative about school in general, and by 3rd grade TNVPK participants actually demonstrated lower academic achievement and worse behavior skills compared to the control group.

This study contributes to my problem statement by shedding light on the learning trajectory of children enrolled in academically focused early childhood education, whose large initial cognitive gains do not hold up over time. Because TNVPK was designed primarily to foster *academic* achievement in at risk populations, the authors of the study questioned whether the program's limited academic focus (and its push to turn PreK classrooms into junior Kindergartens) may have contributed to the poor long term outcomes of its graduates. Though they did not give any suggestions for a superior program structure, they strongly advocated for further study to design a large scale program that could achieve the positive outcomes demonstrated by participants in the much smaller scale Perry or Abecedarian programs.

Source 3

Little, M. H., & Cohen-Vogel, L. (2016). Too much too soon? An analysis of the discourses used by policy advocates in the debate over kindergarten. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 24(106). Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.24.2293>

This article explores the debate between developmentalists and academic advocates concerning the primary purpose of Kindergarten in the growth, development, and learning continuum of young children. The article examines a history of the evolution of Kindergarten from Froebel (and his efforts to guide the maturation of children's health, morality and industry through play) to Reagan (including his educational reforms to increase academic standards and accountability as well as the impact of standardized testing. The authors identify a list of organizational "players" in the discussion that demonstrate leanings towards development vs academic views of Kindergarten to inform their study. The article then proceeds to analyze these views both as they describe how kindergarten "should be" (the idea) as well as how it currently is (i.e. the problems with it's current state) across four dimensions: "(1) goals and purposes, (2) pedagogical approach and teacher role, (3) curricular content, and (4) the roles assessment plays in kindergarten (p 10) using Russel's dichotomized framework to define each group's view of "should be" and Stone's causal theories to define their "is." The conclusion the author's reach is that in goals and purposes, pedagogical approach and teacher role, and assessments both camps possess largely similar views of what Kindergarten should be. The main difference in thought is seen in curricular content and the specific learning outcomes that academic advocates define which are largely absent from developmentalist perspectives.

This article contributes to the question through its in-depth analysis of the arguments being made by public policy organizations of both developmentalists as well as academic advocates in an unbiased light. In comparison, the similarities between the two schools of thought are just as illuminating as their difference. One place that they seem to agree consistently is that Kindergarten educational practices should be meaningful and appropriate to meet the unique needs of these young learners. Though there are some differences between the content that each group feels should be promoted at this age, the consideration of how this content is to be disseminated is more similar, with both groups supporting playful, child centered exploration and decrying the current trends towards rote and didactic teaching styles and assessments. In the end, both groups agree that the current state of Kindergarten overall is not meeting this goal, though their explanations for this failing are more consistently divergent depending on their lens.

Source 4

Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2005). Can play and learning be integrated in a goal-orientated early childhood education? *Early Childhood Practice: The Journal for Multi-Professional Partnerships*, 7(1), 5–22. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00313830802497265?src=recsys>

The authors of this theory based article state that their intention is not to critique the separation of play from learning, or to suggest that child only learn through play (though they acknowledge that for young children learning and play are often inextricably linked). Instead, they suggest that in order to meet the unique needs of this developmental age, the observation of children at

play can inform pedagogical practices that mirror the way children learn about their world.

Three main aspects are put forth, including: “(1) children’s experience as a point of departure, (2) discernment, simultaneity and variation as key-factors and (3) meta-cognition, meta-cognitive dialogues and meta-communication as crucial issues” (p. 631) These aspects suggest that children learn best from where they are, interpreting the world around them through their current skills and capacities. Knowledge that lies too distinctly outside of their experience cannot be easily assimilated or fully understood. Therefore, pedagogical practices which address children’s natural tendency for exploring their environment through their senses or which spring from their own interests and knowledge base builds a stronger connection to learning outcomes. In addition play serves to develop synaptic connections through self initiated practice which might remain underdeveloped if the child was not able to freely explore various aspects of the subject to grasp its qualities. They conclude that play also presents children with the opportunity to reflect on their thinking and form new associations to prior knowledge and experience, leading to new ideas and opportunities to develop creativity and flexibility.

This article contributes to the question through its examination of how children explore and reinforce key academic concepts including science, numeracy, and language in their own play. The authors suggest that early childhood educators can take up the roll of learning collaborator along with their young learners to offer needed support in a way that feels familiar and meaningful to the language of children. It suggests that though the teacher should hold specific learning objectives always in their mind, they must acknowledge that the developmental stage of young children may hinder their ability to make desired gains from didactic forms of teaching which older children may be more likely to benefit from. In this model, the development of academic skills

takes place alongside of (rather than in place of) creativity, initiative, self direction, and motivation. In this way, the whole development of the child is addressed through their favorite form of self expression.

Source 5

Russell, J. L. (2010). From child's garden to academic press: The role of shifting institutional logics in redefining kindergarten education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(2), 236-267. doi:10.3102/0002831210372135.

The author of this study uses a variety of resources to empirically demonstrate the shifting perceptions of the purpose of kindergarten education over the past century from a developmental focus (relating to child lead playful exploration, social/emotion growth, and the development of behaviors necessary for later formal schooling success) to an academic focus (concerned primarily with formal, teacher directed instruction to master a set of standardized cognitive benchmarks). To calculate this shift the author draws from references in research, newspapers and journals, policy documents from local, state, and national sources, as well as the work of professional organizations (through annual conference keynote addresses and newsletters). Consideration was given to student readiness, student learning goals, curriculum (activities and tools), assessments, the role of teachers, and the purpose of kindergarten as a whole. Across all of these considerations and in all of the points of reference, the author revealed a substantial shift in attention away from the developmental focus of Kindergarten towards an academic one. For example, a collection of 32 newspaper articles on Kindergarten education in the 1950's reveal a

97% focus on developmental logic, with only 3% percent reserved for academic logic. By the 2000's this balance had nearly reversed, with 83% of articles having shifted toward a focus on academic logic in Kindergarten.

The purpose of the article was to empirically confirm the impression of kindergarten's shift in focus away from developmental and towards academic ends, which adds to my question by removing doubt that this perception of the increasingly academic focus of the Kindergarten year is being inaccurately assumed. Though the author does not weigh in on whether this shift has been positive or negative in the lives of our youngest learners, she does briefly explore the ongoing "tug-of-war" between the two camps, and question the somewhat nebulous causes of this shift being made, including the professionalization of Kindergarten teachers, the impact of Head Start on the early childhood trajectory, and the system's general shift towards an emphasis on global academic competitiveness with academic goals being pushed downward out of necessity. To this end, she argues for the need for a more methodological approach to studying and shaping the Kindergarten educational system, to ensure that changes are being made in order to best meet the needs of young learners across their life spans rather than as a reaction to public policy discourse.

Source 6

Schweinhart, L & Weikart, D. (1997). High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12 , 117-143.

The High/Scope Perry study documents the long term effects of early childhood educational experiences on low income children. Three groups of children were included in the study, those attending a play based school, a High Scope program, and a highly scripted and academically focused direct instruction (DI) program. Initially all three groups showed similar cognitive gains, with the largest IQ gains demonstrated by the DI group at around age 5 (though all three programs produced average IQ gains of 17 points by age 10 - demonstrating that organized preschool educational experiences have some potential for producing cognitive growth). However, when at age 15 behavioral indicators were included with the academic measurements, findings were alarming: DI students had an average of 2.5 times as many acts of misconduct as the other study participants; 47% of the DI students had been identified as emotionally disturbed, compared to only 6% of the other students; and only 47% of DI students would go on to graduate from high school, compared to 70% of the others in the study. By the age of 23, the DI students were showing some serious developmental problems: 34% had been arrested for a felony offense, compared with 9% of the others; 27% had been suspended from work, while none of the others had been; none of the DI students had married and were living with spouses, compared with 31% of the others, and only 11% of the DI students had ever done volunteer work, compared to about 43% of the others.

This study relates to my question because it illustrates the potential consequences of designing a curriculum that children are expected to meet (programmed-learning) rather than one that is ex-

pected to meet the needs of the children (child-centered). When blocks are replaced by workbooks (as was the case in the DI classrooms in this study) the long term consequences to the healthy social/emotional and community minded development of young learners may be profound. Using a basket of blocks requires planning, decision making, initiative and social awareness, experiences that use of a workbook cannot replicate.

Source 7

Suggate, S. P., Schaughency, E. A., & Reese, E. (2013). Children learning to read later catch up to children reading earlier. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 28(1), 33-48. doi: 10.1016/j.ecresq.2012.04.004

According to the results of this research study conducted by Sabastian Suggate (2013) on young public school children in New Zealand, no long term gains were observed by teaching children to read at a younger age. In this study he compared annual test results of 54 children who attended a publicly funded Steiner school, primarily focused on learning through play (including art, singing, storytelling, and cooking), who did not start reading instruction until age 7, to 50 children who had followed a traditional school model and started explicit reading instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness at age five. Despite initially large gains for children in the early reading instruction group in key reading indicators such as mean decoding and reading fluency, by the age of 12 children in the late reading group had actually surpassed the scores of their earlier reading counterparts.

This article relates to my question because it demonstrates that initial gains in academic skills do not necessarily translate into long term advantages. The author concludes that “because later starters at reading are still learning through play, language, and interactions with adults, their long-term learning is not disadvantaged, [and] if there aren’t advantages to learning to read from the age of five, could there be disadvantages to starting teaching children to read earlier?” This question seems of paramount importance for the field to answer.

Conclusion:

This Annotated Bibliography considers the conflict between developmental and academic theories of learning especially as they relate to the inclusion or exclusion of play in the lives of young learners. As the debate between these two camps is far from settled, it seems more work needs to be done to satisfactorily address the question of what is best for a diverse population of young learners and especially what is to be gained and what lost in the lives of children encountering each mode of instruction in their earliest schooling experiences. Decisions about best practice should be informed though extensive theory and research and should not be made lightly as the long term consequences in the lives of children can be profound.