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Early childhood preservice teachers' perception on play

Irene McIvor Mason
University of Rhode Island

Hyunjin Kim
University of Rhode Island, hkimed@uri.edu

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Preservice Teachers' Perception on Play

Abstract

This study examined preservice early childhood education (ECE) students' perceptions of play as part of the classroom experience. An analysis of 67 preservice students' answers to three open-ended questions designed to elicit their perception of play, revealed respondents overall were "encouraged" by the use of play as a teaching tool. In addition, they held a favorable view of incorporating play into the classroom experience. This study showed that educational experiences had a significant impact on encouraging preservice early education teachers to incorporate play into the curriculum.

Objectives

Several studies indicated positive roles of play-based practices in social, cognitive, motor, and linguistic improvements as well as in a high level of executive function and intrinsic motivation (Bjorklund & Gardiner 2011; Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013; Eberle 2011, 2014; Fisher et al., 2011; Sussman, 2012; White, 2012). Under the current academic oriented standards-based curriculum, the implementation of play-based pedagogy seems to be challenging for teachers to integrate into their lessons (Danniels & Pyle, 2018). While play is a vital part of early childhood teaching, Copple and Bredekamp (2009) found one of the challenges that preservice (ECE) teachers' face in trying to adopt play as their pedagogy is a paucity of research on teaching through play that supports its role as an instructional tool. In order for preservice teachers to develop a pedagogy that incorporates play in the classroom, they need to explore what their attitudes are towards play, whether they perceive their curriculum can be enhanced by play, and what their reactions and concerns are towards incorporating play into their pedagogy.

Identifying preservice teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the incorporation of play into the development of curriculum, could advance teacher education programs by allowing for the inclusion of experiences that would encourage, reinforce, and support preservice teachers' pedagogical knowledge and practice of play as an education tool. This study proposed to answer three research questions as determined by the participants' responses to open-ended questions on a self-report questionnaire.

Research Question1:

What are preservice early childhood teachers' attitudes towards play as a learning tool?

Research Question2:

What are preservice early childhood teachers' attitudes towards play as a teaching tool?

Research Question3:

What are the concerns of preservice early childhood teachers towards incorporating play into their pedagogy?

Theoretical Background

Two influential theorists that sought to explain a child's cognitive development are Piaget and Vygotsky. Their ideas about the role of play are embedded in their theories of cognitive development. Piaget found that children best learn through play and construct the meanings of their world at each stage of play (Piaget, 1962; Reifel & Sutterby, 2009). He examined the differences between an adult's and child's way of thinking and postulated that children learn by experiencing discrepancies between what they already know and what they learn through their environment (Piaget, 1962; Reifel

& Sutterby, 2009). Vygotsky and his followers also believe that play is a vehicle for learning and development across all domains, especially for self-regulation, motivation, and decentration (Vygotsky, 1976; Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Bronson, 2000). Unlike Piagetian theory, Vygotsky stressed the importance of social interactions and social contexts and explained the role of play as a socially constructed product in cognitive development. According to him, a child's cognitive development is greatly enhanced by the creation of new knowledge through play (Vygotsky, 1976).

Although there is no unified attitude towards play in today's early childhood classrooms (e.g., Vera & Geneser, 2012), a body of research on play underpins both Piaget and Vygotsky's theories (Wood & Bennett, 1998). However, a review study reported that a majority of teachers in early childhood settings do not efficiently integrate play into their curriculum (Rengel, 2013). Using a netnographic approach, Lynch (2015) studied perceptions of kindergarten teachers' on play and implied that teacher education program need to provide the preservice teachers with rich experimental opportunities to develop effective play-based teaching skills than merely increase the awareness of the importance of play in teaching and student learning. This lack of incorporating play into their teaching practices could be related to their beliefs and perceptions of play as an educational tool (Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004) and a tendency to not include play in their discussion on pedagogy (Stephen, 2010). This indicates that teachers' practices are the consequences of their lack of reflection on pedagogical beliefs and attitudes towards "play". For preservice teachers to develop a pedagogy that incorporates play into teaching practices, they need to explore what their attitudes are towards play, whether they perceive their curriculum can be enhanced by play, and what their reactions and concerns are towards incorporating play into their pedagogy. Identifying what factors encourage and discourage preservice teachers' incorporation of play into the development of curriculum, could advance teacher education programs by allowing for the inclusion of experiences that would encourage, reinforce, and support teachers' attitudes towards play.

Method

Participants. A total of 67 preservice early childhood education students at a university in the Midwestern United States participated in a self-report survey used to collect information for this study. All participants were female and ranged in age from 19 to 30 years old ($M = 20.97$, $SD = 1.67$). The racial and ethnic identity of the sample as reported by participants was predominantly White (86%), with approximately 7% Native American, and less than 6% reporting as Latino, Asian, Biracial, or Other. Approximately 90% of the participants were single.

Procedure. Using a self-report questionnaire, the authors asked three open-ended questions to answer the research questions. The open-ended questions given to the preservice teachers included "Should play be part of the early childhood classroom experience?", "What aspects of the curriculum could be enhanced by play?", and "How do you feel encouraged or discouraged by your education to allow play in your classroom?"

A coding agenda (high level of conviction = 1, moderate level of conviction = 2, low or no level of conviction = 3 and no response or response inconsistent with the question = 0) was established and the criteria for the definition of each category were determined. A response that was positive, consistent with the question and made no exceptions was coded as having a high level of conviction, a response that was positive and consistent with the question but modified with an exception was coded as having a moderate level of conviction, and a response that was vague or inconsistent with the question or in opposition to the question without an exception was coded as having a low or no level of conviction. Responses that were left blank or those that were inconsistent with the question were coded as 0.

The respondents' answers to the questions were analyzed, coded, and the results interpreted. The percentage of students' responses per coding rule was calculated for each of the three survey questions.

Content Analyses

In order to determine, "What are preservice early childhood teachers' attitudes towards play as a learning tool?" participants were asked to respond to the open-ended question; "Should play be part of the early childhood classroom experience?"

Participants' responses to this question included: play can improve development, children enjoy play, play is very important in the classroom, play is a way for children to explore their imaginations and environment, play is a great way to engage children while they learn and can make learning fun, play is crucial to the classroom experience, activities the children choose themselves are also important and play should not be part of the classroom experience. A summary and percentage of the answers to the question "Should play be part of the early childhood classroom experience?" are found in Table 1.

Table 1

ECE preservice teachers' responses to survey question one, "Should play be part of the early childhood classroom experience?"

Category	Definition of Conviction	Examples	Coding Rules	Percentage
LT1 High level of conviction	<i>Response clear and positive without reservation or exception.</i>	"Yes, play is how children learn so it should be included in the environment."	<i>Response 100% positive without reservation. Code as LT1 high level of conviction.</i>	88%
LT2 Moderate level of conviction	<i>Response clear but modified. Exceptions(s) made for a situation or experience</i>	"... play should be part of the classroom experience. However, play cannot be all that is promoted."	<i>Response clear but modified with an exception. Code as LT2 moderate level of conviction.</i>	6%
LT3 Low level of conviction or no conviction	<i>Response vague may indicate lack of understanding of the question or clearly states opposition with no exception.</i>	"I do not believe that play should be part of the classroom experience because I believe that children express themselves differently when they are on their own and interacting freely with peers."	<i>Absolute opposition with no exception. Code as LT3 no conviction.</i>	1.5%
R0 No response	<i>Participant did not supply a response to the question or response was not consistent with the question.</i>	Participant wrote her name instead of answering the question.	<i>Response missing. Code as R0.</i>	4.4%

Note. Percentages when added do not equal 100% due to rounding.

The answer to the second research question, “What are early childhood preservice teachers’ attitudes towards play as a teaching tool?” was determined by the participants’ response to the open ended question “What aspects of the curriculum could be enhanced by play?”

Participants’ responses to this question indicated that play can be used as a teaching tool as play helps children make sense of the world, play can strengthen the curriculum as well as encourage group activity and team building, play is a useful tool for development, play teaches them to collaborate and communicate with others whom they may or may not see eye to eye with, play is a good way to observe their interests and then scaffold learning, play is important as it's extremely difficult for them to just sit there and listen to the teacher, and play can make learning fun. Participants’ responses also included: play combines different skills for each activity, gives the children time to interact with one another while having fun, and enhances their ability to have energy for their minds to work and grow, lay allows a child to learn without realizing it. Children learn how to listen, become social, and explore on their own without being led by an adult figure. A summary and percentage of the answers by level of conviction to the question, “What aspects of the ECE curriculum could be enhanced by play?” can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

ECE preservice teachers’ responses to survey question two, “What aspects of the ECE curriculum could be enhanced by play?”

<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition of Conviction</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Coding Rules</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
CP1 High level of conviction	<i>Response clear and positive without reservation or exception.</i>	“Every aspect of the curriculum could be enhanced by play.”	<i>Response 100% positive without reservation. Code as CP1 high level of conviction.</i>	61.5%
CP2 Moderate level of conviction	<i>Response clear but modified. Exceptions(s) made for a situation or experience.</i>	“Social, emotional, and physical aspects could be enhanced if conducted or directed in the right manner.” “Some aspects of the curriculum can be enhanced by play.”	<i>Response is clear but modified. Code as CP2 moderate level of conviction.</i>	33.8%
CP3 Low level of conviction or no conviction	<i>Response vague and may indicate lack of understanding of the question or clearly states opposition with no exception.</i>	Not applicable to responses.	<i>Absolute negativity with no exception or modification. Code as CP3 no conviction.</i>	1.5%
R0 No response	<i>Participant did not supply a response to the question or response was not consistent with the question.</i>	Participant wrote her name instead of answering the question.	<i>Response missing. Code as R0.</i>	3.08%

Note. Percentages when added do not equal 100% due to rounding.

The third research question, “What are the concerns of preservice early childhood teachers towards incorporating play into their pedagogy?” was answered by the preservice teachers’ responses to the survey question, “Do you feel encouraged or discouraged by your education to allow play in your classroom?”

Participant responses ranged from being encouraged to incorporate play into their pedagogy by seeing other teaching professionals support play, by their professors’ support, and by their own personal experiences in the classroom. Participants were also encouraged by the materials they were utilizing when in class including their assigned textbooks, readings, and research articles. Participants reported understanding the need to incorporate play as it makes lessons fun, therefore early childhood children would get more out of the curriculum. Participants were discouraged by lack of support from the school system and by the pressure of administering standardized tests. One participant stated she was discouraged because kids get too loud and get into trouble and another reported being discouraged from incorporating play into the curriculum because too much play prevents students from “learning the basics.” Other responses included being discouraged from incorporating play into the curriculum if participants perceived children were not getting anything out of it or if their students were not interested in what they were providing. Table 3 presents a summary and percentages of responses to the survey question, “Do you feel encouraged or discouraged by your education to allow play in your classroom?”

Table 3

ECE preservice teachers’ responses to survey question three, “Do you feel encouraged or discouraged by your education to allow play in your classroom?”

<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition of Conviction</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Coding Rules</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
PP 1 High level of conviction	<i>Response clear and positive without reservation or exception.</i>	“I feel encouraged because many scholars acknowledge the importance of play.”	<i>Response is positive with no exception. Code as PP1 high level of conviction.</i>	73.0%
PP2 Moderate level of conviction	<i>Response clear but modified. Exceptions(s) made for a situation or experience.</i>	“I feel encouraged when play is used as a tool to teach but discouraged if the children are not getting anything from what they are a part of.”	<i>Response clear but modified. Code as PP2 moderate level of conviction.</i>	15.5%
PP3 Low level of conviction or no conviction	<i>Response vague, or response indicates lack of understanding of the question or clearly states opposition with no exception.</i>	“... discouraged if the class setting is all based around play then the kids will never learn the basic things early on such as counting ... and so forth.”	<i>Response is in opposition to the question. Code as PP3 low level of conviction.</i>	10.0%

PP0 No response	<i>Participant did not supply a response to the question or response was not consistent with the question.</i>	Participant left question blank.	<i>Response missing. Code as R0.</i>	1.5%
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Note. Percentages when added do not equal 100% due to rounding.

Summary of Themes

From the content analyses, three themes were extracted: play as a teaching tool, play as a learning tool, and professional development that supports incorporating play. Coding analysis indicated that respondents demonstrating “high levels of conviction” believe that play is an important learning tool and should be part of the classroom experience. Preservice teachers also demonstrated high levels of conviction that multiple aspects of the ECE curriculum including social, emotional, and cognitive skills can be enhanced by play. While some respondents expressed concerns about incorporating play into their pedagogy, responses indicated that various educational experiences including: “learning developmental and education theories,” “observing and talking with my ECE teachers,” and positive research on the subject” encouraged them to allow play in the classroom. Survey respondents overall were “encouraged” by the use of play as a teaching tool and held a favorable view of incorporating play into the classroom experience for various reasons related to their belief that curriculum can be enhanced by play. Play as a teaching tool was cited as an important part of the ECE curriculum allowing for building skills necessary for learning through “supporting cognitive development” and for allowing “children to strengthen their creativity skills along with social skills, cognitive skills, gross motor, and fine motor skills”. Our study also revealed which educational experiences had a significant impact on encouraging preservice early education teachers to incorporate play into the curriculum.

Conclusion

The belief that play is important for the development and education of young children is widely accepted by educators and supported by constructivists and child psychologists. Such knowledge can potentially impact the development of teacher education programs to maximize preservice teachers’ experiences that will encourage, reinforce, and support their incorporation of play in their lesson plans. As “*Play is a condition of learning*” (Fromberg, 2002, p. 82), play-integrated teaching will bring more meaningful learning context as a power instructional tool for children. Teacher education programs need to provide preservice teachers with ample opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills in incorporating play-based teaching practices across different content areas in early childhood. In addition, as it is important to invite parents to their children’s learning process, in order to effectively apply play-based pedagogy in their teaching, beyond their perception on play, preservice teachers should enhance their skills to explain “play” as a powerful instructional tool and the notion that children are learning while playing (Scharer, 2017). It can be the first step towards making this vision feasible by identifying what factors encourage and discourage preservice teachers’ incorporation of play into the development of curriculum. This is a small exploratory study that needs to be replicated on a larger scale with a more diverse population and control for factors such as socioeconomic status and educational background of the participants which could influence a preservice teacher’s perception of and attitudes towards play.

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