Early Childhood CURRICULUM for All Learners

Integrating Play and Literacy Activities

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To Greg, who taught me all about building "major construction sites."

—AMS

To Karen and Sean, thank you for your love, support, and inspiration.

—RJG

To my family, who always puts a smile on my face when I am knee-deep in work. Thank you for making it all worthwhile. I do it all for you!

—ERMF

Preface

Over the past two decades, a growing number of parents, principals, primary teachers, and politicians have identified traditional, developmentally appropriate early education practices—particularly play—as non-essential academic activities for children from 2 to 8 years of age. They have demanded that formal academic accountability start in the early learning settings, arguing that this strategy will minimize the academic gap that has occurred between children of different socioeconomic groups, racial and ethnic groups, special education populations, and English language learner groups. In response to this criticism, early education curricula have changed to emphasize daily activities that focus on direct instruction led by adults rather than on child-centered activities. However, results to date indicate that, even with the increase in formal educational time, significant academic gaps still exist when children enter the formal education system.

In response to the existing significant academic gap, a growing number of today's teachers, caregivers, and researchers have asserted that children's classrooms must become more natural and playful learning environments. Findings now demonstrate that young children can expand their academic skills through the practice of guided play activities. Guided play is a form of child-centered play where adults structure the environment around general curricular goals designed to stimulate children's natural curiosity, exploration, and play through interactions with objects and peers.

This book demonstrates how to integrate guided play activities across the curriculum so that learning will occur for all children who are enrolled in early education programs today.

Specifically, the book promotes strategies to be used during playful activities that are carefully guided by an adult so that children can reach their highest level of learning and expand their knowledge across the curriculum, and especially in the areas of language and literacy. Research on current theories of learning, language development, and play activities are presented in Part I of the book, along with an entire chapter dedicated to developing the collaborative relationships with family members and other professionals. Part II describes strategies for designing classrooms, schedules, and learning activities so that children will engage in high-level, child-centered learning activities. Also included in Part II is a chapter on observation and assessment, along with an observation tool for assessing young children's general play, academic, communication, and social abilities. Part III provides comprehensive strategies for integrating guided play activities into the learning centers typically found in early education classrooms, such as literacy, science, mathematics, social studies, and creative arts.

Each of the book's 14 chapters begins with a factual learning *scenario* that demonstrates some of the key concepts that will be discussed in that chapter. Following each scenario are a number of *open-ended prompts* that are designed to have the instructor and students focus on the upcoming information. A large assortment of *figures* that summarize information presented in the text, and pictures demonstrating specific strategies are incorporated into each chapter. Each chapter also contains 3 or 4 *Apply and Reflect* activity boxes, which students and teachers can use to apply a specific concept to a real-life activity and to analyze the impact of this application. Toward the end of each chapter are *Key Terms, reflective questions, useful websites,* and

suggested *home and community activities*. Each chapter also presents a *first-person interview* with a practitioner who is working in the early childhood field and who has exemplary skills in a specific area. Finally, the last five chapters in the book include sample developmentally appropriate *learning activities* for teachers and caregivers to use with young children.

Throughout the book evidence-based findings reinforce the premise that guided play activities must be used to integrate the early learning standards for young children and Common Core State Standards for children in early primary grade classrooms. The findings demonstrate that young children who use free and guided play activities, especially the most diverse and challenging preschoolers, have results superior to those that they would produce through activities solely directed by adults. Additionally, today's transitional kindergarten classrooms need to implement play-based curricula instead of removing it from their programs. If anything, the philosophy and pedagogical principles underlying the Common Core State Standards have more in common with the play-based learning presented in this book than past adult-directed educational practices.

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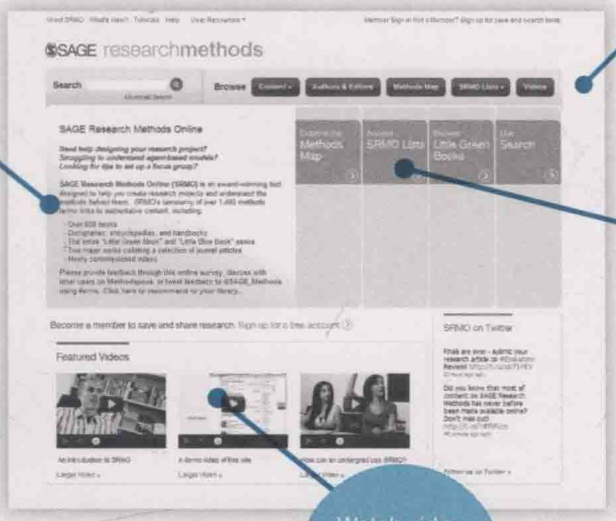

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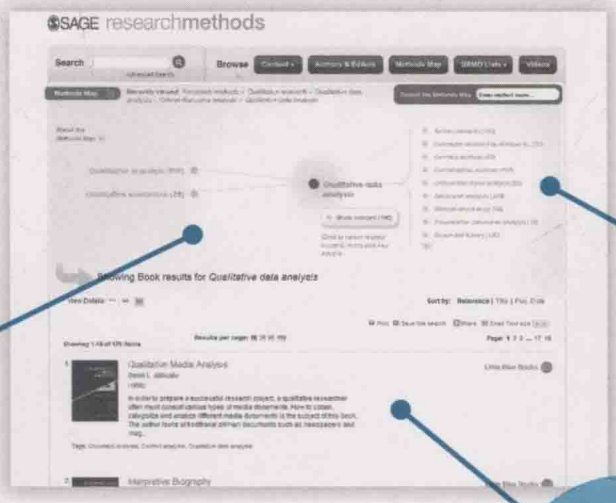

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