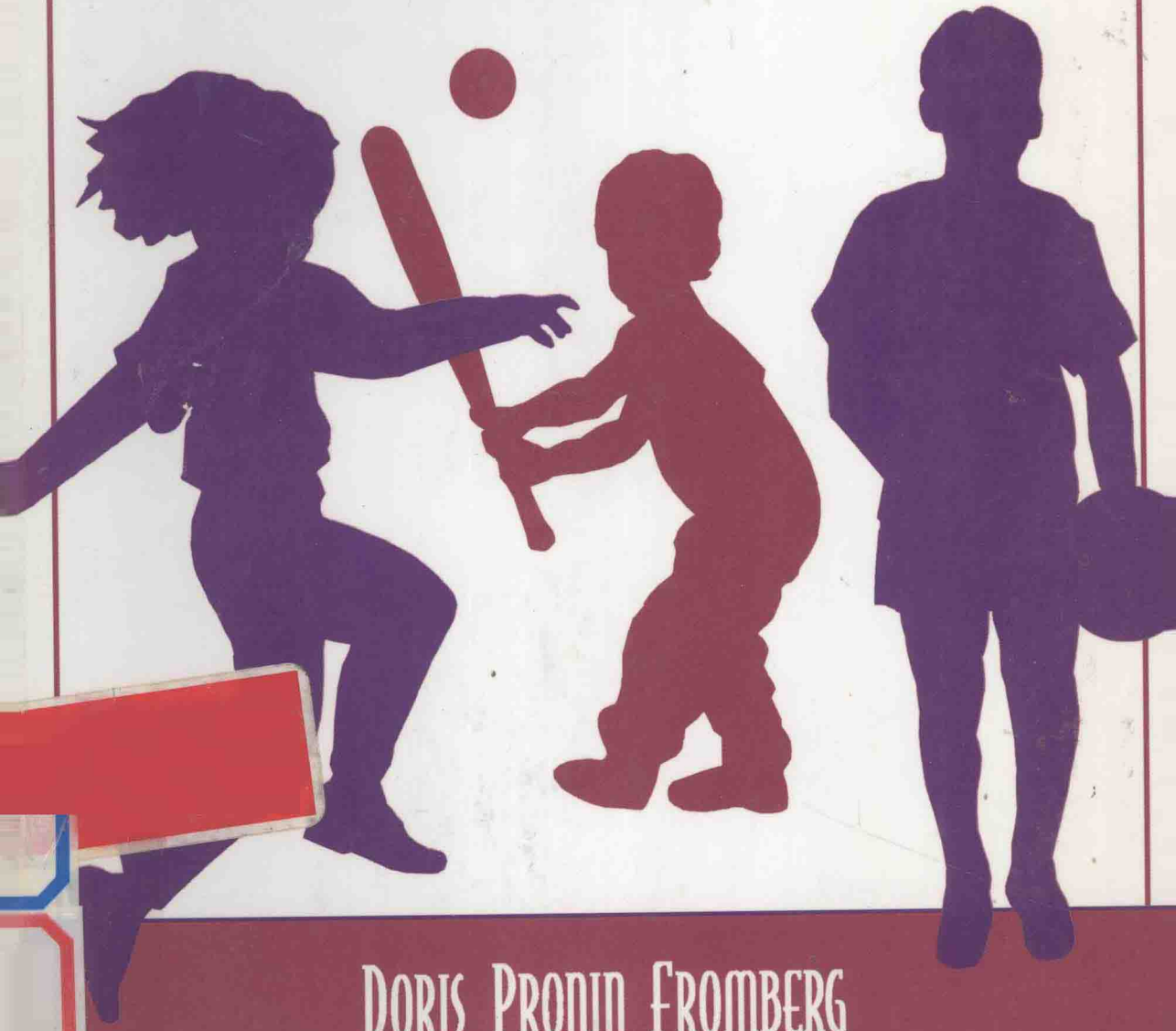
Play and Meaning in Early Childhood Education



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Play and Meaning in Early Childhood Education

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Allyn and Bacon

Boston ■ London ■ Toronto ■ Sydney ■ Tokyo ■ Singapore

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A Pearson Education Company
75 Arlington Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02116

Internet: www.ablongman.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fromberg, Doris Pronin.
Play and meaning in early childhood education / Doris Pronin Fromberg.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-205-29650-5 (alk. paper)
1. Play. 2. Early childhood education. I. Title.

LB1139.35.P55 F76 2002
372.21—dc21 2001022434

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 06 05 04 03 02

PREFACE

This book about play and meaning in early childhood comes to light at a time when play and meaning are in the shadow of political pressures for early education to focus on a narrow curriculum devoted to technical skills in the three R's and transmitted informational facts. However, the narrow type of academic "transmission" education continues to fail many children. The way that children put their experiences together resembles a moving web of connections more than a stored set of stationary drawers or a growing pile of packages. If schools could reduce curriculum to a list of everything that children might need to know, youngsters would not have enough space or hours in a lifetime to add it all up. Children's learning is generative, not just additive.

Young children's play opens a window onto the ways that they understand the world and grasp fresh meaning. This book looks through that window to see how to match the process of teaching to the ways in which children develop meaning. The view through the window of children's play is definitely not straight or static; it is a vista that celebrates the creativity of children's play themes as eloquent representations of their sociocultural and personal-cultural experiences.

Educators and students of curriculum will find *practical ideas* for including play and meaning in early education. Students of child study, the nature of meaning, and sociocultural perspectives on play will find *reasons* to use play and meaning in early education. Educational policy makers will find *information* about the nature of play and meaning in the lives of children, and *guidance* concerning the nature of early childhood curriculum. The practical ideas, reasons, information and guidance concerning play and meaning are introduced under the following headings: dynamic themes curriculum; political and social influences; a recommendation to shift from an academic to an intellectual emphasis on dynamic curriculum; a dynamic theory of play and meaning; and the mutual influence of theory, research, and practice.

Dynamic Themes Curriculum. To provide an alternative to a uniform, narrow, additive kind of curriculum, educators need to reconfigure early education. In a transformed early-childhood education, teachers will build on children's strengths as players. To do this, teachers must select, flexibly sequence, and cluster activities that can support young children's capacity to make new connections. Cyclical change, indirect progress, and synergy are all examples of ways to connect physical, social, and artistic experiences. This book refers to these three underlying experiences as dynamic themes; children who have equivalent experiences that share an underlying dynamic theme may participate in those experiences through different social, physical, or artistic surface forms.

Varied experiences that represent the same dynamic theme are like melodies transposed into different keys or played by different instruments; we might also

think of different subject-matter disciplines as different musical keys. The latter sections of the book and the resource appendices discuss how children and teachers can interact to develop meaning; these sections describe a variety of practical ways to implement a dynamic curriculum that focuses on meaning and young children's play.

Political and Sociocultural Influences. Our cultural contexts and perspectives shape our expectations of what is relevant in teaching and learning. Today, there is a political pressure to achieve uniform outcomes related to universal standards in predictable forms, and to raise standardized test scores. Policy makers take the position that raising standards will influence educational outcomes so that graduates can become gainfully employed. But who defines "higher" standards? Policy makers often assume giving harder work to young children in school is the answer to society's problems. They believe that checking off a uniform list of skills and information will remedy the contemporary ills of society.

In today's "tougher" educational arena, teachers and children focus on results (teaching and learning for the sole purpose of preparing for a standardized test) rather than on the reasons behind what they do at schools (Kohn, 1999) and the practical applications of what has been learned. Standardized tests repeatedly measure what is easy to test rather than what constitutes relevant learning.

Shift from Academic to Intellectual Emphasis on Dynamic Curriculum. Our rapidly changing world requires us to shift from an academic to an intellectual emphasis as we think about early education. The image of an unpredictable future invites human beings to adapt to change, think flexibly, persevere, make connections, network with others, integrate skills, and take responsibility for their actions. Young children's power as players sows the seeds that society will need in the future. To grow, those seeds need a supportive community culture and supportive educators, including teachers, parents, *and* policy makers.

This book takes the position that play is an integral condition for early learning and that meaning is the shared center of learning and play. All children do not develop in uniform ways. Each child is unique. Therefore, these pages create a dynamic bridge between how children develop in both different and similar ways, and why and how professional early childhood educators might interact with particular children to help them integrate meaning.

Dynamic Theory of Play and Meaning. This book also responds to the question of why teachers should think of early-childhood curriculum design as the flexible pursuit of dynamic themes. We look in turn at children and research as bases for developing a theory of play and meaning, and we examine the theory in order to better interpret how children play and learn. The chapters that follow explore a theory of play and meaning in early childhood education that builds on research and the overlap of three theories—script theory, theory of mind, and chaos/complexity theory. These theories underscore the generally predictable and specifically unpredictable nature of play and the development of meaning.

Mutual Influence of Theory, Research, and Practice. Researchers have found that children's play influences their development of skills in language, cognition, social competence, and creativity. Teachers who understand the research and

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theory about how young children play and learn will be better able to select from among diverse experiences to help young children balance and expand new challenges and independence.

After presenting research, theories, and the practical application of the theory of play and meaning, the book offers a paradigm shift for curriculum designers. Some readers may prefer to focus on the practical Sections Three and Four, which follow the introductory chapters. Others may prefer to read straight through to consider research findings and the confluence of theories that influence the author's proposed theory of play, meaning, and teaching.

Whatever path you choose in reading, remember that teachers need to know how to maintain relevant challenges for youngsters. Love alone is not enough to protect children from a paralyzing sense of failure and powerlessness. Play offers a territory in which children can construct and represent the world and cultivate knowledge of their own power.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Hofstra University for giving me the time to develop this project and to Dean James R. Johnson for supporting a special leave with research funds to study children at the Hofstra University Arnold and Joan Saltzman Community Service Center's Lindner-Goldberg Child Development Institute. Institute director Donna Tudda's support, the skill of head teacher Alma Rocha, and the powerful child players in the Institute added to the project.

I also greatly appreciate the suggestions of constructive anonymous reviewers and Karen VanderVen, along with the involvement of Traci Mueller of Allyn and Bacon. Melvin Fromberg and Deborah Fromberg were conscientious and generous critics who made this project a family affair. They only added to the project, whereas I am responsible for any limitations that readers may find.

D.P.F.

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SECTION ONE

Vision Informs Dynamic Theory

This section outlines the domain of play and meaning in early childhood from the perspectives of teaching and the development of individual children within sociocultural contexts. Chapter 1 considers the need for a dynamic theory of play and meaning in early childhood and discusses how such a theory may influence teaching. Chapter 2 develops a multifaceted definition of play as one condition for learning. Chapter 3 describes how children play from infancy through the primary grades and considers some chracteristics of play that span human development. Chapter 4 discusses research studies about play as integrated learning that influences children's social, intellectual, and language development as well as their development of imagination and creativity. Chapter 5 summarizes the implications of brain research for nurturing the growth of meaning in early education.

CHAPTER

1 What Is Worthwhile Learning?

Is it enough for children to learn to decode, understand print, and pass standardized tests but not seek out literature outside of school requirements? Is it enough for them to successfully memorize answers to informational questions on standardized tests but hesitate to question the events around them or express personal opinions? Who values narrowly defined uses of skills and information for their own children or for themselves?

Astrophysicist Michio Kaku's (1997) projections of the future suggest that the world needs people who can do three important things: (1) envision more than one answer to a question—even a question designed to elicit a single correct answer; (2) take imaginary leaps and act on them; and (3) adapt to rapid change. Kaku also predicts that computers may become so miniaturized that they may be as expendable as scrap paper is today. In addition, he believes that quantum mechanics will transform and extend human travel into outer space and that biotechnology will continue to redefine body parts and health—all within this century. The world will need people who can think flexibly, collaborate with others, and feel comfortable with the predictably unpredictable.

Many of these human qualities are already detectable in the play of young children. Indeed, a major strength of young children is their capacity to play, and to build an understanding of the world through their play. How can educators help children build on their strengths so as to prepare themselves for the future?.

Toward a Dynamic Theory of Play and Meaning

A dynamic theory of children's reality speculates about how they develop and represent their understanding of the world during play. Moreover, recognizing how play influences the development of conceptual, linguistic, social, and creative meaning helps us understand how children learn in general and how adults might interact with them in more meaningful ways.

As it turns out, there is a relationship between play and meaning or understanding. Children play naturally as they construct meaning. However, many educators caution children to "finish their work before they play." The attitude of work first, play later, devalues play. The word *meaning* is also controversial. Different people mean different things when they talk about "meaningful education"

and "meanings" that matter. Although schools do want children to learn new ideas and skills, educators disagree on what knowledge and skills are worthwhile and how children should be taught.

This book focuses on how young children develop meaning through play. By understanding the ways in which children develop their play and meaning, educators can better match teaching with learning. Traditional education focuses on teaching children in what we'll see below is a linear manner, but children develop meaning in nonlinear ways. This book argues that teachers must match children's nonlinear ways of learning with nonlinear ways of teaching. It also provides strategies for accomplishing this matching.

Linear Academic Teaching

Educators who engage in linear academic teaching typically transmit to children an adult conception of knowledge in uniform, narrow, and additive ways. Recently, many teachers have engaged in this model of teaching. They have responded to political pressures to "raise standards," teach more, teach sooner, and measure results by the standardized testing of children's memorization of facts and use of discrete skills. In the linear model, the administration asks all teachers in a school or district to use didactic recitation and uniform content; children memorize single correct answers and learn isolated skills to apply at a later time. Solitary paper-and-pencil tasks predominate. Teachers often deliver the linear curriculum with warmth, and try to gain children's involvement through enthusiasm and rewards. For example, they engage children in the uniform construction of crafts projects that the teachers themselves have designed for children to follow. Frequently, the information that teachers ask children to remember proves as trivial as the crafts projects. Thus, skills education (the "three Rs") in the linear model often lacks significant meaning; the information discussed in the classroom may have little or no relation to the questions that children have about their world and environment. For example, city children may be more interested in what happens to the rain flowing into the sewer than in how the rain forest functions. The linear model of teaching has predominated in the United States and has failed to educate all children equitably.

Nonlinear Intellectual Teaching

Teachers who engage in nonlinear teaching expect knowledge to develop when children construct meaning while interacting with other people and the physical world. These instructors take a holistic approach and center their teaching on issues that engage children in questions about their social and physical world. The nonlinear approach integrates skills as children learn meaningful content through direct experiences and their capacity to imagine. The questions they pursue together may have more than a single correct solution. The skills children use are

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