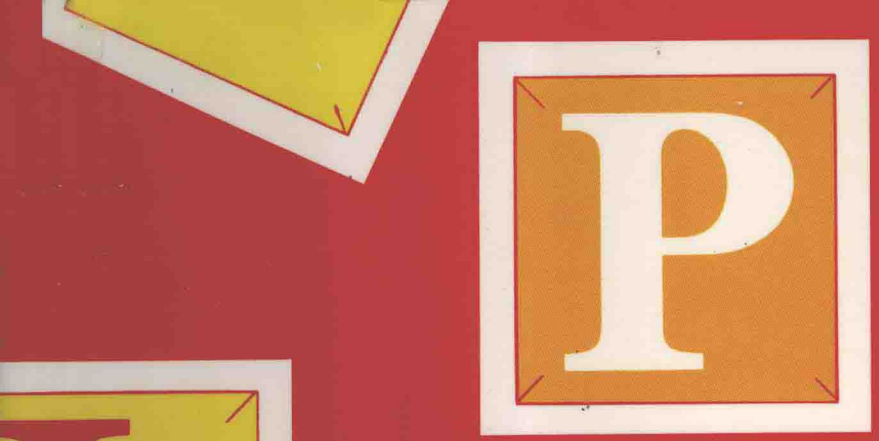
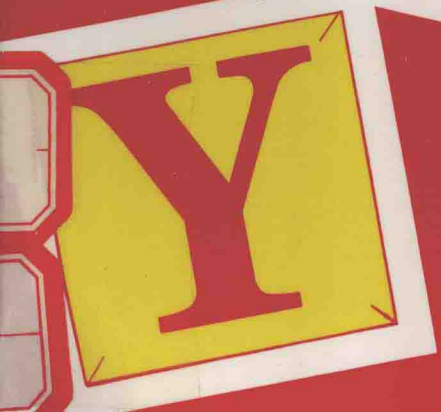


PLAY
and the Social Context of Development in Early Care and Education



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Teachers College, Columbia University
New York and London

Published by Teachers College Press, 1234 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027

Proceedings of an Institute of Human Development symposium, University of California, Berkeley, May 1988.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Play and the social context of development in early care and education
/ edited by Barbara Scales . . . [et al.].
p. cm.—(Early childhood education series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8077-3067-X.—ISBN 0-8077-3066-1 (pbk.)
1. Play. 2. Education, Preschool—United States. 3. Education.
Preschool—California—Case studies. 4. Cognition in children.
I. Scales, Barbara, 1930– . II. Series.
LB1137.P53 1991
372.21—dc20 90-2234

ISBN 0-8077-3065-3
ISBN 0-8077-3066-1

Printed on acid-free paper
Manufactured in the United States of America

98 97 96 95 94 93 92 91 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Foreword

PAUL MUSSEN

Research on the origins, nature, and functions of play—topics of speculation since ancient times but only recently the foci of systematic investigation—can yield critically important information about cognitive, social, and emotional development. The findings of such research may also be applied practically and effectively in preschool education and child care, settings in which play is the central activity. The conditions or contexts in which play occurs are governed not by researchers but by educational professionals—indirectly by policy makers and directly by teachers and administrators.

Although practitioners and developmental researchers share a fundamental goal—the promotion of the welfare of children—they operate virtually independently of each other and with minimal communication between them. Yet it seems obvious that both groups could benefit enormously from continuing communication: Policy decisions and early education programs should be guided by scientific knowledge, while research would become richer and more relevant if it took into account the educational professional's everyday activities and goals that shape the social context of play.

A multidisciplinary symposium on "Play and the Social Context of Development in Early Care and Education," held at the Harold E. Jones Child Study Center of the University of California in May 1988, was designed to stimulate this kind of communication. In the editors' words, it was intended to "provide a forum for a dialogue between researchers interested in studying play in context and educational professionals struggling with the new and conflicting demands of the growing institutionalization of early care and education." Almost all the thoughtful and thought-provoking chapters in the present volume are based on papers

given at that symposium. Even a cursory review of the contents reveals that a wide net was cast and a broad spectrum of perspectives was represented. No other publication provides such a clear picture of the complex problems practitioners confront—for example, analyses of the social-economic-political issues of public policy relating to child care, the establishment of standards for optimal child care institutions, responding sympathetically to the individual needs of young children, and the taxing workloads of teachers. The lucid accounts of research findings offer compelling evidence that play of all sorts—free play, constructive play, peer interactions, guided expression, and play with blocks—can be highly effective in promoting the development of manual skills, language, empathy, thinking and reasoning, and social and emotional adjustment. Furthermore, the research chapters offer many novel insights into the meaning of play, and the authors carefully spell out the practical implications, illuminating the ways teachers can stimulate children's play in order to achieve educational goals.

Yet in a real sense, these highly informative and challenging chapters demonstrate the need for more and more focused dialogue between practitioners and researchers, for each chapter is written from the perspective of *either* the context of play—that is, major social and educational factors affecting the work of child care institutions—*or* the nature of play in its impacts on learning. Only a few chapters deal with relationships between these parameters.

The unique, invaluable contribution of this volume is its *consciousness raising:* It informs researchers, theorists, and practitioners of one another's accomplishments, goals, and problems. This reciprocal awareness will stimulate interactions that will ultimately produce deeper insights into the links between aspects of the social contexts of child care institutions and the educational, development-enhancing activities of those institutions. Furthermore, by specifically defining the many needs for further research and by evaluating the contributions and limitations of current theories, the authors indicate ways to make investigations more sophisticated and comprehensive and to formulate more integrative theories, leading to more fruitful educational applications of scientific findings in the future.

Acknowledgments

This book and the symposium from which it originated owe their existence to the support of the Institute of Human Development, University of California, Berkeley. Special thanks go to Paul Mussen, who as the Institute's director at the time, provided initial support, guidance and advice for the Symposium. Thanks are also due Joseph Campos, the Institute's current director, who provided support for the preparation of this publication. Acknowledgments must also go to their assistant, Susan Cardwell, a resource of inestimable worth.

We are also indebted to all of those who participated in the symposium, as well as to those who contributed chapters to the book.

The Child Study Center, its director, Jane Hunt, and its staff contributed to the project in many ways. The Center provided the setting for the symposium. Secretaries Sheila Bradley, Amy Udisches, Alice Engle, and Patrice Parame took care of myriad details for the symposium and for preparation of the manuscript. La Shonda Spencer and Carol Heller, student assistants, helped with some of the tasks of editing. Hannah Sanders, former head teacher in the Center, took over in the classroom when Barbara Scales's editorial responsibilities seemed about to eclipse those of teaching.

Marcy McGaugh was the ever efficient typist for much of the manuscript. Acknowledgment should also be made to the Teachers College Press editorial staff. Sarah Biondello and Nina George provided initial and continuing encouragement. Faye Zucker's developmental editing helped to sharpen and focus the editing, while Myra Cleary's copy editing elicited favorable comments from many of the authors.

Contents

Part II. Language, Literacy, and the Social Worlds of Children

Part III. Play, Cognitive Development, and the Social World

Part IV. Play and the Social Worlds of Children

Introduction

BARBARA SCALES
MILLIE ALMY
AGELIKI NICOLOPOULOU
SUSAN ERVIN-TRIPP

This book, and the symposium on which it is based, grew out of concerns for the effects that the increasing institutionalization of child care and early education may have on the role of play in the development of the young child. As early care (once exclusively the domain of the home) is increasingly ceded to the public domain of schooling, conceptions and demands about it shift, depending on what perspective one adheres to at the moment or on the issue of concern.

On the one hand, schooling is traditionally associated with learning and education. When early care is seen from this perspective, both parents and teachers demand that early learning be continuous with and vital to later learning. Some want the academic skills of elementary school to be taught in kindergarten or preschool. Others want programs to concentrate on the young child's natural and playful propensities for learning. All believe that young children now need a head start to meet the increasing demands of our highly literate society. On the other hand, when early care is viewed from the perspective of the home it is replacing, then most parents and teachers want to make the settings for early education and care homelike, nurturing environments where learning is usually informal and often playful.

While teachers attempt to provide an environment that supports play, they are also compelled to justify the educational goals of their daily classroom activities, whether playful or not, to parents, administrators, and other teachers. Among teachers, there is a growing recognition that early childhood curricula need to be articulated more clearly (see Chapters 3 and 13). Some preschool teachers respond to conflicting de-

mands by adapting curricula from kindergarten and early grades, trying to change the pace to fit younger children. Others continue to encourage spontaneous play, and attempt to justify its place in the curriculum by citing the learning that they see in it. Some teachers experiment with new ways of structuring or intervening in children's play to incorporate goals appropriate to their ages. Unfortunately, teachers often lack sufficient time to make and record systematic observations, and later to evaluate whether what they did was successful or not. Also, they have little time to compare and discuss their observations with others who work in similar settings. Such concerns as these suggested to us that teachers might enjoy contributing to a dialogue with researchers who are also interested in play.

From the research arena, we were interested in engaging researchers who share a framework with educational practitioners; that is, researchers who attempt to study development in its sociocultural context—a group that has been growing in recent years. The increasing interest in this approach is reflected, for example, in the current resurgence of the sociocultural theory of L. S. Vygotsky; the growing concern with cultural, educational, and psychological studies; and the expanding acceptance of ethnographic research as an appropriate method for studying socialization. This approach has allowed researchers to study socialization in such places as homes, classrooms, and playgrounds.

Given these important trends in both the professional and academic communities, it seemed an opportune moment to provide a forum for a dialogue between researchers interested in studying play in context and educational professionals struggling with the new and conflicting demands of the growing institutionalization of early care and education.

It also seemed an appropriate time to include in the dialogue individuals who could speak to issues of policy affecting this institutionalization. In the United States, research, policy, and practice often develop independently of each other. Yet, in the present instance, it is clear that the provisions made for children's play in child care centers will depend not only on the evidence that teachers and researchers can bring to bear on the importance of play, but also on their ability to share their findings with the public, parents, and especially policy makers. All need to understand that play is unlikely to flourish in settings that are overcrowded and understaffed.

Bringing together differing professional groups promised to provoke some lively dialogue. It also seemed that as the participants learned of each other's realities, goals, and aspirations, some interest in collaboration might eventually emerge. But the initial goal was simply to provide a forum for the dialogue. The Institute of Human Development at the

University of California at Berkeley, which has for over 50 years researched the effects of early experience on later development, sponsored a symposium around this convergence of interests in play and, appropriately, provided the Harold E. Jones Child Study Center as its setting.

The lively interchange in the symposium among presenters and between presenters and other participants, including a small number of researcher colleagues and early childhood teachers, indicated that the topics stimulated mutual interest. The dialogue had begun. Our book attempts to extend it.

Three Views of Play

A major portion of the dialogue centered around play's place in the curriculum, reflecting three different views. The child, of course, is impelled to play as a "whole" child, at once an affective, cognitive, social, and physical being. The researcher, looking at the child's play, may, however, categorize it as belonging to a particular domain of behavior as social, or cognitive or motor. The researcher who stays in the classroom long enough to observe developmental changes, may attribute them to the child's play experiences.

The teacher, privy to a tremendous amount of information about each child and the group of which each is a part, views play somewhat differently from most researchers. The teacher asks whether play activities, so indigenous and so absorbing to children, must be curbed in order to teach them, or whether the play activities, in themselves, constitute opportunities for learning. Knowledgeable teachers are aware that an increasing body of research and theory, beginning perhaps with Piaget, exists to substantiate the latter view.

The belief that play activities have a legitimate and fruitful place in the early childhood curriculum prevails in this book, and influenced our selection of the views of play that are presented. Thus, Part II of the book is devoted to discussions of play from the view of language and literacy. Connections between the playful aspects of children's symbol manipulation and their later literacy learning have recently been recognized in holistic approaches to literacy.

Language and literacy, usually described as "learning to read" at the early childhood level, may be the hottest issue early childhood teachers confront. It is an issue that has grown hotter as general dissatisfaction with elementary schooling has increased. It is also an area where research, much of it done in classrooms with the collaboration of teachers, has begun to pay off. Countering the narrow and long prevailing empha-

sis on reading readiness workbooks and primers with controlled vocabulary, the efficacy of capitalizing on young children's interests in print and of drawing on their play life for themes to write about has been demonstrated. Accordingly, a number of state education departments and school systems are already working to change their approach to teaching reading. Research has also shown how children's play contributes to their language development. We believe that the collaborative efforts of teachers and researchers, as well as their findings, have much to offer early childhood educators. The justification of play in other curriculum areas might well evolve through the use of similar strategies.

Another view of the role of play in the curriculum looks specifically at its cognitive aspects. Here the guiding question for the teacher may be, What concepts do children reveal or are they acquiring through play? For many years, early childhood teachers have been able to draw on the work of Piaget and of researchers inspired by him, for assistance in looking at these kinds of questions. Part III of this book discusses cognition, but it moves beyond questions related to the nature of children's concepts to examine, again from the viewpoint of the educator, the processes involved as children "learn through their play." Here the theory of Vygotsky extends that of Piaget and illuminates the role of the child's social world, including the teacher's part in it. This appears to be a promising area for teachers and researchers to explore together. It is not yet nearly as well developed as the area of language and literacy.

The third view of play, taken up in Part IV of this book, is equally promising, but even less well developed than that of cognition as it relates to the social world. This view looks directly into that social world and tries to ascertain how children view themselves, each other, and the adults around them. It is concerned, in the largest sense, with the ways children use their play to construct their own humanness. Play from this view is the work children must do to establish who they are and how they are like and how they differ from their peers and from adults, and to test their own powers. More narrowly, it has to do not only with social development but also with moral development. As this area of research and theory expands, it promises early childhood education a powerful argument for the importance of play in the curriculum. At the same time its very nature seems to demand collaboration between researchers and teachers.

Contributors to the Dialogue

The reader may have noted from the list of editors and contributors at the back of this book that some of the authors are described as research-

ers in child development and others as teachers or early childhood educators. A word about the selection of the authors seems in order. All of the researchers, both those who made presentations and those who wrote "the research perspectives" chapters that introduce Parts II–IV of the book, were invited to contribute chapters because of their identification with one of the three views on play delineated.

The authors of the "perspectives from the field" chapters that end each part of the book are all individuals with long experience as teachers in varied early childhood programs. All, who are also active in early childhood organizations, responded enthusiastically to the invitation to describe the concerns and commitments from which they view research.

The Editors' Views

Having finally and gratefully assembled and perused 17 chapters from authors known to be much too busy to write another word, let alone an article of some length, we marvelled at the richness and diversity of the ideas presented. Surely every reader will find here something to expand and illuminate what he or she already knows about young children's play, some insight to modify or extend curricular provisions, or some question to which an answer can be sought.

Perhaps that is enough said. On the other hand, the reader may welcome some further guidance to the content of the chapters, and some pointing to the issues that are raised. Our debates among ourselves raised the possibility that adding our voices to the diversity of voices already speaking in the different chapters might only create further cacophony. Despite that risk we choose to be heard.

Framing Our Concerns

The first part of the book provides background by delineating issues that surround policy for early education and care. Chapter 1 considers play and its place in early education and care from an historical perspective, showing that today's issues are deeply rooted. It considers the contradictions that have arisen when early childhood teachers have taken strong positions on the importance of play but have failed to buttress their positions with strong scientific evidence. While some pioneer nursery school teachers were able to collect systematic evidence about play from their own classes, such collection in the face of other demands on the teachers' time and energy, often coupled with inadequate child development preparation, has become increasingly difficult. Underpaid and

overworked, as has long been the case in women's occupations, many early childhood teachers have experienced a sense of powerlessness that has made the assumption of true professionalism difficult. In an occupation that is so highly labor intensive the issue of how to advance professionalism and the related recognition deserved by practice based on scientific knowledge remains persistent and crucial.

Chapter 2, by Grubb, considers some of the history and concerns raised in Chapter 1 but in the larger focus of public policy. He shows, on the one hand, what is involved in quality programs and, on the other hand, the areas where negotiation must take place, if such programs are to come into being.

Early childhood educators, researchers, and parents reading this chapter may well ask themselves which of their own favorite ideas serve as shibboleths that can block progress in negotiating resolutions to policy issues. An examination of the negotiations that eventually led to a coalition of organizations that backed the proposed Act for Better Child Care Services, which came before Congress in 1988, 1989, and 1990, might also be instructive.

In Chapter 3, attention shifts to a single policy issue and the way it has been dealt with in a single state, California. Smith reports on her experience as a member of a state task force on school readiness. Its recommendations eventuated in a new policy for programs for 4- to 6-year-olds. The chapter raises many questions. How do the various protagonists in the story define play? Why do the views of so many teachers appear so contradictory? Is "experiential instruction" a euphemism for play? If so, how is the curriculum for 6-year-olds to differ from that for 4-year-olds? How do parents of varying backgrounds view such school policy shifts?

Beardsley provides information on some of these questions in Chapter 4. She describes the ways in which many teachers have responded to the new California policy and points out the factors that may impede progress. These include inadequate preparation for the new kind of teaching, insufficient funding, and problems of articulation between preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. Most important, she considers another group of stakeholders in the policy's success, parents.

This chapter is the only one in the book that devotes a section to parents although references are made to them throughout. Since the institutionalization of child care means that an important aspect of the child's life—play—may be transformed, it seems strange that so little early childhood literature and research have given consideration to the views of parents. One suspects that too often parents are expected to collaborate with teachers in promoting children's play before sufficient