

Practical Approaches for Implementing Play in Early Childhood Education Classrooms

A Research To Practice Summary

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ABSTRACT

Play is a fundamental component of early childhood development, yet it is being increasingly lost in educational settings due to children's technology use and academic pressures to limit play in the classroom. This article describes the implications for teachers of a research study examining early childhood teachers' perceptions of play and its alignment with actual classroom practices. Findings of the study highlight the need for integrating play into structured learning to support children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Recommendations include reflective practice, classroom assessments, and embedded play during daily instruction. Addressing systemic barriers requires a shift toward play-based learning, ensuring that educational environments support children's holistic development.

KEYWORDS

Play, early childhood education, teacher perceptions, classroom practices, play-based learning

Play in the Current Literature

There is a consensus in the research and educational community that children learn through play (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Halliday et al., 2023). Theoretical perspectives from Piaget, Vygotsky, and contemporary scholars highlight the importance of play in learning (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Gray, 2013; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Zosh et al., 2018). Although this is widely accepted, high-quality play practices have been set aside in many classrooms across the nation in favor of more structured academically directed approaches to learning, which impact how teachers use instructional classroom time. Limited play time is not exclusively a classroom issue. It is also affecting early childhood societal experiences, partly because of increased screen time since the COVID pandemic, and more accessible technology specifically targeted at kids—both which have contributed to a decline in physical and imaginative play, affecting children's cognitive and social

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development (Bassok et al., 2016; Christakis, 2015; Fleeer, 2021; Jarvis et al., 2014; Singer et al., 2009).

The Loss of Play

Play is an essential component of childhood development, serving as a primary means for learning and communication across cultures (Rentzou, 2012). Despite its recognized importance as a vehicle for developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2022), play is increasingly diminished due to several factors. One major contributor is the rise of new technologies, which has significantly altered childhood experiences. Screen usage, often established in early childhood and reinforced over time, has led to excessive media consumption, surpassing recommended limits (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2019). While technology offers educational benefits, most of the screen time is dedicated to entertainment and social engagement rather than learning. Increased digital media use has been linked to negative impacts on cognition, language and literacy development, social-emotional skills, executive functioning, attention span, and sleep (Hinkley & McCann, 2018; Madigan et al., 2019).

Another factor reducing play opportunities is the shift over time toward standardized education, which emphasizes academic achievement over holistic development. Early policies such as the Educate America Act (1994), Goals 2000: and No Child Left Behind Act (2002), and more recent policies such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) have sought to close achievement gaps through standardized testing, influencing early education practices. While standardized assessments provide insights into learning, specifically areas that need special attention, they often emphasize rote memorization at the expense of authentic understanding, limiting teachers' ability to foster creativity and tailor instruction to children's developmental needs (Starr, 2017). Consequently, preschools and kindergartens are increasingly focused on formal reading and math instruction, reducing opportunities for play-based learning (Bassok et al., 2016). Research suggests that an early emphasis on rote learning can hinder later problem-solving abilities, whereas play encourages exploration and innovation (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Elkind, 2012).

The Need for Play in Early Childhood

Play is recognized as a fundamental right of children, as established by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Molu, 2023). It is more than a leisure activity; it is a crucial element of childhood education and development (Wohlwend, 2023). Play fosters essential life skills such as teamwork, communication, and creativity, promoting a more holistic approach to learning (Cheung & Ostrosky, 2023). Self-directed play allows children to explore, develop problem-solving skills, and achieve developmental milestones outside of structured academic settings. Dramatic and fantasy play have been associated with the development of socio-emotional skills and creativity that persist into adulthood (Halliday et al., 2023). Additionally, play provides psychological benefits, helping children express emotions and cope with challenges (Honeyford & Boyd, 2015).

The reduction of play in early childhood settings has broad implications for children's mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Peer play supports emotional regulation and social development, serving as a protective factor against mental health challenges. Studies indicate a strong correlation between early engagement in peer play and lower incidences of mental health difficulties later in life (Zhao & Gibson, 2022). Despite these findings, playtime opportunities in early childhood education continue to decline, limiting children's developmental experiences. Research highlights the critical role of play in fostering executive function, enhancing language and math skills, building resilience against stress, and strengthening stable relationships (Yogman et al., 2018). Given these findings, early childhood educators must prioritize play as a core element of holistic child development. Creating classroom environments that incorporate both structured and unstructured play opportunities can support children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth while fostering lifelong skills necessary for success.

Overview of the Study

In the corresponding study (Burke & Mollenkopf, 2025) to this article, the researchers used three

research questions to gather information about early childhood teacher's perceptions of play and how play was implemented in the classroom: (1) What are early childhood teachers' perception and attitudes towards play, (2) What are the barriers to implementing play in their classrooms, and (3) how much time is being devoted to free child directed play in the classroom? Then they compared these perceptions with the teachers' use of play in their classrooms to better understand how closely their beliefs align with actual classroom practices. This study used surveys, interviews, and observations to gather information. The survey and interview were developed by the researchers to effectively target the research questions. To evaluate classroom practices four-hour observations were conducted using two authentic assessments: the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3) and The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). During the classroom observations play times, free play and gross motor play (centers and recess), were recorded to highlight the discrepancy between teacher lead instruction and child led play-times within the four-hour observation window. These times were later helpful in understanding outcomes on the ECERS-3.

Results of this study indicated that teachers believed in the value of play but implemented less play time than recommended, which resulted in lower scores on the ECERS-3 and the CLASS. Teachers indicated in both the survey and interviews that they felt the main barrier to implementing recommended levels of play in the classroom was a lack of time in the day. This was compounded by expectations placed on them to implement multiple curriculums so children would meet standards and outcomes they were expected to achieve by the time they entered kindergarten. These perceptions were backed by observation results. These results highlighted low scores for classrooms with less than an hour of free play in the classroom. Additionally, an unexpected outcome of this study highlighted possible socioeconomic implications. Government funded programs recorded the lowest scores not only on play domains but also were shown to have less positive classroom environments. On the other hand, the highest scoring classroom across the board was the private program.

Research to Practice Connections

The need for high quality play experiences in early childhood programs has never been higher with the rise of sedentary behavior and technology use. This research study demonstrates the current state of early childhood education programs and highlights the research to practice and policy gap. The goal of this section is to provide a bridge between these important elements in the field of early childhood. Research is ineffective if it is not easily accessible in the hands of those on the front lines to implement into their practices. As this study highlighted, teachers are already struggling to balance competing priorities in the classroom. The researchers hope to give educators an easily accessible approach to implementing strategies based on this research.

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Recommendations for Implementation

Recommendations for implementing results of this study include reflective thinking, program evaluation, and adjustments to align implementation. First, teachers need to personally reflect on the value they place on play as learning and development tools. The next step will include evaluating current classroom practices for play times and how play is being utilized in the classroom. After assessing play in the classroom teachers should identify and address any barriers they perceive to include play in a way that is representative of their beliefs and appropriate for their setting. The last step will be the most transformative, which is finding ways to address or work around those barriers to create a more playful learning environment.

The first step will most likely be the easiest and most straightforward for educators as many already understand their feelings about playing in

early childhood education. However, the challenge, then, becomes identifying if those beliefs are accurately reflected in classroom practices. Reflecting may include writing down a position statement for play, envisioning what play would look like in their classroom, or even making a list of ways play is important for development and learning. This reflection piece may serve a dual purpose for educating parents and administrators on the importance of play for children's learning and development which could help to alleviate barriers those stakeholders may be imposing on classroom practices.

The next step is addressing the challenge in play positionality. What does play look like in the classroom, how is it being used, and how much time is devoted to playing? This can be assessed through simple observation or reflection of the classroom schedules. Teachers could choose to use a familiar assessment tool such as the ones used in this study or any other environmental assessment to utilize data to reflect their classroom practices. A collaborative approach may be appropriate for some settings by having another teacher or staff member observe the classroom environment and give feedback about classroom practices and suggestions for potential areas to embed learning outcomes into play. Additionally, teachers may reflect on what is going on during play times. This includes what the teachers are doing at that time as well as what the children are engaging in. Reflection in this area may highlight a need for more large body movement time, more engaging materials or scaffolding of existing materials in less frequented play areas.

Implementation of increased play time is likely the hardest challenge for teachers, given the pressures teachers face to increasingly implement more structured academic content. However, making learning playful can help to increase classroom engagement while making critical content accessible to children. Harvard researchers have published two incredible free resources for creating and implementing a playful learning pedagogy (Harvard, 2022; Mardell et al., 2023). Teachers can take one or two key ideas and implement these without making large changes in the schedule. Then they can build on these ideas over time. Documenting children's skill growth and social learning during play-based activities can help them advocate for quality play

time that fosters healthy growth and development. This evaluation and re-evaluation will remain an iterative process; however, system change is possible through incremental changes implemented over time.

“When a child doesn’t thrive, you fix the environment in which they learn, not the child.” -Carl Ebert

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