

Teacher Perception of Play: In Leaving No Child Behind Are Teachers Leaving Childhood Behind?

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The value of play seems inherent to the understandings of early childhood, but teachers of young children in the elementary grades have rarely been studied as to their attitudes toward play (Wing, 1995). The research explored teacher perceptions of the role of play in learning and the implications for practice. The study involved 4 first-grade teachers from 2 diverse socioeconomic school settings. The phenomenological work followed a qualitative format of interview with an analysis of related documents. Although the instructors held a common value for play in the development of young learners, they did not make a corresponding provisions for such in their classrooms with the exception of 1 participant. Varying perceptions of the definition and place of play resulted in differing levels of willingness to include child-initiated play that were spawned within the educational contexts. These perceptions led to the inductively realized outcome variables of instructional goals, student products, and classroom climate. Dewey's (1916) view of work and play, Bredekamp and Rosegrant's (1995) Continuum of Teacher Behaviors, and Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of reasoned action provided frameworks for deductively understanding the teachers' instructional decisions.

In response to a child complaining about the workload of his school day, a teacher answered, "This is your job, just like I have a job." The cultural dynamics that order the typical day for today's child, including the school experiences, necessitate that many children follow schedules as full as the schedules of adults. It is a phenomenon that seems to minimize the importance of unstructured play in childhood. Whether it is due to the competitive attitudes among

parents and educators, to government initiatives, to the modern-day lifestyle, or more likely, to a combination of factors, is not the point of this research. However, the lives of “overbooked” children do seem to mirror those of busy adults with minimal time for the open-ended choices viewed as “play.” Though in earlier times children were viewed as “miniature adults” (Postman, 1982, p. 41), these historical perspectives of childhood have changed over time largely due to the accepted belief that children need time for nurture, growth, and natural development. This time excuses and protects them from engaging in the workforce at early ages and shelters them from certain aspects of adult interactions. Such an awareness justifies the distinct period of time we consider “childhood” as a transition period between infancy and adulthood. Those adhering to the notion of childhood recognize the need to include time for play with freedom to explore an environment through movement and talk. With the empty playgrounds and on-task behaviors of the classrooms, we must ask whether we intend to preserve our sense of childhood in relation to the concept of play.

In the context of the early childhood educator’s understandings of appropriate practice there is a sense of “emergent curriculum [that is] sensible, but not predictable. It requires of its practitioners *trust in the power of play*—trust in spontaneous choice making among many possibilities. Good programs for young children encourage children to become competent players” (Jones & Nimmo, 1994, p. 1). Play research and theory hold that children 4 years old through 7 are in a life stage that makes play an informing aspect of their cognitive development. It would follow that the classrooms for this age group need to afford and foster an atmosphere conducive to such. However, in today’s educational landscape we find there is less understanding of, and indeed less trust for, the child-initiated play that spawns deeper meanings and conceptual understandings. With goals and objectives identified through ends-sought test outcomes, there have emerged defined curricula cultivating the practice of direct instruction as the efficient means to achieve the goals, to the neglect of children’s propensity for play-based learning and child-initiated thought. The public’s sense of urgency in fulfilling the mandate for No Child Left Behind challenges those who believe in child-centered teaching to maintain child-initiated learning experiences among the teacher-initiated lessons. The question that emerges is whether, in our resolve to leave no child behind academically, we have embarked upon an educational course that suggests we leave childhood behind.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Teachers today, sensitive to what can be viewed as the child’s way of learning, are continually engaged in a precarious balancing act. The problem involves im-

plementing curricular goals and objectives while attempting to maintain an environment that allows for child-sponsored activity. Within the contexts of our schools, and indeed all of American society, we seem to be experiencing a disregard for the child's perspective and need for play. To illustrate, a European woman commented that as her children acclimated to American schooling, it was very difficult for them to adjust to the preponderance of teacher-directed experiences. Their previous schooling overseas had made room and time for play within the context of the school learning experiences. This lack of freedom for children to express and act upon their ideas in the "land of the free" was bothersome at best, but was it not also detrimental? Has the current national effort to guarantee that our children achieve skills that seem developmentally significant at certain ages replaced and discounted our concern that we be developmentally appropriate?

In terms of cognitive function, particularly related to literacy development, researchers have identified significant milestones of language development that contribute to academic success (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Developmentally appropriate practice naturally does not prescribe a classroom of all child-initiated activity that would ignore such considerations. The position held by Bredekamp and Rosegrant (1995) suggests that teachers need to exhibit a variety of teaching styles that would include aspects of direct, mediated, and non-direct instruction within the context of appropriate practice. Fromberg (1999) observes that Dewey's work "suggests the following continuum: fooling-play-work-drudgery" (p. 28). We, therefore, can juxtapose Dewey's (1916) description of the work-play relationship (pp. 115–116) with the continuum of teaching behaviors identified by Bredekamp and Rosegrant (1995, p. 21), showing visually that both work and play can be included within a pedagogy of what is appropriate and significant for children. A continuum explicating this understanding was formulated from the work of Dewey and Bredekamp and Rosegrant. (See Figure 1)

Bredekamp and Rosegrant made the point that "for too long early childhood practice has been simplistically characterized as a dichotomous choice between

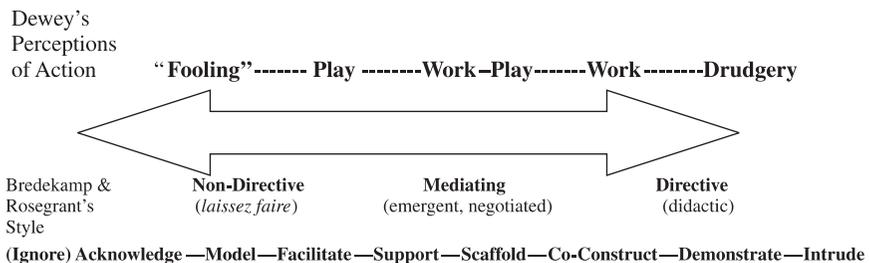


FIGURE 1 Continuum of work-play perceptions and instructional style.

child-centered and teacher-directed learning” (1995, p. 21). The reality for many is that we fluctuate along a continuum of teaching strategies with the preponderance of interactions ranging between the aspects of mediation and direct instruction, leaving little time for the unbound play considered here. We seemed to have moved into a situation where children are to be seen and not heard, and recognized merely for their scores on the latest battery of tests. “Though child interest is an important facet in the guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) ... child interest may not be the sole yardstick against which curricular decisions can be made in an elementary school setting” (Goldstein, 1997, p. 16). This tension between child interest and adult intent exists in the everyday dynamic of the classroom. It has been explained that the absence of play in elementary schools is a philosophical decision that reflects school emphasis on achievement (Glickman, 1984).

Some of the tension that arises amongst opinions and beliefs about the role of play in the classroom is found in the contrasting beliefs of the traditional (didactic, teacher-initiated) and progressive (responsive, child-initiated) points of view. Each of these approaches, one work-oriented and one work-/play-oriented, is evident in kindergarten through third-grade classrooms. “Learning theorists tend to advocate the early introduction of basic skills using teacher-directed, didactic instructional approaches ... emphasizing recitation and memorization,” whereas “child development experts who are guided by constructivist theories of child development advocate a ‘child-centered’ approach that emphasizes child-initiated learning activities. (Stipek, Daniels, Galluzzo, & Milburn, 1992, p. 2). Teachers may be eclectic in their approach as they attempt to respond to the play processes of children while meeting societal pressures for the work ethic.

We also find tension regarding the role of adults in relation to children’s play. Some maintain a strict adherence to the Piagetian view that cognitive strides through play are made in a solitary way, unfettered by adult or more knowing peer participation. The disallowing of the influence of caregivers’ scaffolding held by researchers during the 1960s and 1970s (Smolucha & Smolucha, 1998) may yet permeate our understandings and actions on many levels, leading to a Rosseauian hands-off approach—in Dewey’s words, “fooling.” (Dewey, 1916/2004, p. 115). Although this contention may not be apparent as a driving impetus in decisions related to practice, it possibly illustrates an underlying philosophy that considers adult participation in play as more intrusive than informing for the child.

Today’s tendency to detail each aspect of learning and instruction makes it seem almost irrelevant to inquire as to the status of play in the classroom. However, as children’s lives outside of school become increasingly structured with planned activities or increasingly passive with television and computer games, it seems essential that the school day, in contrast, maintain a balance of adult- and child-directed activity. Young children have distinct ways of perceiving and expressing that differ from those of the adults who instruct and interact with this age group.

Adults may consider play and work functions to be distinct and compartmentalized despite the observations of play theorists. For example, Sutton-Smith (1995) pointed out, "If we focus upon childhood it is almost impossible by observation to sort out when the child is playing (in a ludic sense) or when he or she is exploring and learning. The two interact constantly" (p. 283).

Children experience, within their moments of play, a growth that allows them to thrive cognitively, physically, and emotionally. Vygotsky (1993/1978), claiming that "the child moves forward essentially through play activity," observed that "at school age play does not die away, but permeates the attitude toward reality" (p. 104). He further noted that "in play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (p. 102). Discernible differences in terms of cognitive and motor function exist within activities related to play. As children progress, there is an elaboration in their play processes. Numerous researchers have suggested the importance of play in all areas of development, especially in the cognitive realm. It has been observed by play theorists who see play as an adaptive feature of humankind that "children who have less opportunity, encouragement, and ... less constitutional predisposition toward regular make-believe play may be missing out on an important phase of becoming fully human" (Singer, 1995, p. 187). Fostering a sense of play in the learning process is perhaps a threat to adult perceptions of what school and learning ought to be. The adult seldom realizes that the ability to play with ideas in an abstract, thoughtful manner has been enriched and made possible by the tangible, active manner of exploration found in young childhood:

Play is an essential part of the learning process throughout life and should not be neglected.... Play that is serious and focused within a learning environment can help learners construct a more personalized and reflective understanding. As educators, our challenge is to implicate motivation into learning through play, and to recognize that play has an important cognitive role in learning. (Rieber, Smith, & Noah, 1998, p. 35)

STUDY QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

My research questions probed to uncover if teachers in the field held an understanding and commitment to play as a mechanism for learning. I focused upon first-grade teachers to see whether any belief in the value of play was retained in the year after kindergarten. It has been observed that the attitudes toward play of teachers of grade-school children have rarely been examined (Wing, 1995). Intrigued by the apparent difference between the kindergarten and first-grade learn-

ing environments, I anticipated that my interviews of first-grade teachers would assist me in understanding the reality of their teaching situations.

Monighan-Nourot pointed out that “teachers’ views of play are shaped by their knowledge, beliefs, and experiences” (1997, p. 128). I intended to uncover some of these views through a sampling of four teachers through interviews. What conceptions and perceptions of play are held by first-grade teachers in terms of definition, form, and value? I asked, “How does play figure into the thinking of first-grade teachers’ perceptions of learning?” Though the value of play long has been acknowledged by the early childhood research community as an essential aspect of child-centered practice in relation to cognitive, motor, and psychosocial development, I questioned whether that shaped the beliefs and practices of first-grade teachers.

Data collection occurred through a qualitative format of phenomenological interviews with open-ended survey instruments guiding the work. The interview guides were further enhanced by questioning probes for deeper understanding. Questions that were posed from the guides, over the four interviews for each participant, included the following: (a) “Why do you believe play should (should not) be part of the classroom experience?” (b) “What aspects of the curriculum are (could be) enhanced by play?” and (c) “How do you feel encouraged (discouraged) to allow for play?”

Interviews were conducted in four time frames with each individual teacher. An initial and brief 20-min interview provided me with the educational background of the teacher and supplied the initial understandings of her current teaching situation in terms of the population being served. At this point I also gathered some personal background in terms of experiences with children outside of the classroom. Accessing copies of the curricular documents of the district and becoming acquainted with the materials and the school environments the teachers worked within were other aspects of the early stages of research. A complete day of observation took place early within the semester of study to provide me with a context for understanding the dynamic of the learning climate established by each teacher. At the end of the school day, I met with the individual participants for the second phase of the interview process. These questions worked through each teacher’s personal definitions of play and work, the meaning of each for children, and her observations of play in relation to first-grade students and the curricula. The teachers and I met mid-semester for a third interview to determine how training, administration, colleagues, curriculum guides/texts, personal preference, and school facilities encouraged and discouraged them to provide play experiences for students. I also inquired at this point as to the memories of personal experiences with play. In conjunction with the third interview, the teachers began their 3-week process of data collection, saving copies of all notes, plans, and children’s work samples of paperwork. Following the cross analysis of data, I formulated an exit interview that posed questions related to an ideal set of circumstances. I probed for how a first-grade teacher could possibly extend a child’s (or a group of children’s) play theme with a follow-up as to why a teacher

might or might not want to do this. The final question explored what kind of school behaviors are considered essential to cultivate in a class of children.

The study of first-grade learning environments, data collection, and the interview comments of four teachers from two different schools in districts of varying socioeconomic status (and two opposite positions in the state “report card”) was the basis of the findings that follow. I adhered to a qualitative methodology with a multiple case study format yielding an explanation building of teacher-held perceptions leading to the data analysis. I also sought insight into what kindergarten students experience in the transition to the next grade. Would first-grade teachers even consider the question of play in their classroom environment? To maintain the researcher’s impartial stance in my questioning process, I adopted the phenomenological perspective to pose the question from a textbook format: “What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?” (Patton, 1990, p. 88). In researching how teachers respond to play within the classrooms of our schools, I hoped to explain not only the “structure and essence” of their attitudes toward play, but to reveal, with these understandings, “how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a worldview” (p. 69).

Open coding of the data allowed for categorical organization of the findings within an iterative mode of analysis. Definitions of play by Parten (1932), Garvey (1990), and Polito (1994) provided the backdrop for the teaching participants’ individual definitions. Piaget’s (1951/1972) forms of play and Ajzen and Fishbein’s (1980) theory of reasoned action provided frameworks for deductively understanding the motivating and constraining variables underlying the choices they made in their work with young children of 6 and 7 years old. I also made a review of the curricular guides of each district represented by the participants. Contextualizing their comments in these ways led to the implications for further research and reflection to inform the question “What do play and learning mean for these individual first-grade teachers?” As a further means of gaining perspective, there was a 3-week period of collecting artifacts from each participant, such as work papers, project examples, notes, and lesson plans. (Additionally, but not presented here in these findings, I spent time observing each of the teachers in active engagement with her students to explore how views and beliefs expressed through interview were or were not manifested within the classroom realities.)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PARTICIPANTS

In selecting participants for this study, I specifically chose to work with first-grade teachers because this is the grade level when typically the focus shifts from

child-centered, open-ended experiences to a content-centered emphasis with tasks assigned by the teacher to develop skills. I recognized that with my very limited sampling there would be no means of applying my findings as representative of first-grade teachers in general. My intent as I entered the field of study was to find teachers who would feel fairly comfortable with their own teaching abilities; thus, one of the requirements was having at least 3 years of experience prior to the year of study. I assigned each teacher a pseudonym. The principals of each site had asked the teachers involved if they would be willing to participate in a study with a university researcher. At Site I, Karissa and Penny were two of three first-grade teachers on staff; at Site II, Darcee and Janelle were two of four first-grade teachers on staff. In profiling each teacher with related professional and personal details I discovered that all the teachers were degreed in elementary education at the bachelor's level and that Penny had minors in kindergarten and reading. Each of the three more experienced teachers also held master's degrees in reading, whereas Karissa was still considering program options for her master's work. In terms of the behaviors of the interviewees, the two sites seemed balanced, with each having one teacher who was more reflective and cautious and one teacher who was more expressive. Karissa of Site I and Darcee of Site II were each more reticent and had less to say in response to the questions. Penny (Site I) and Janelle (Site II) were talkative and freely expressed their ideas.

Karissa and Penny, as two young first-grade teachers in the kindergarten through sixth-grade school building of Site I, were situated in a lower socioeconomic neighborhood with 80% of the students in their two classes qualifying for federally subsidized lunches. The other teacher in the team, who did not participate in the study, was very influential in the decision making of the younger teachers due to her many years of experience. The trio planned together and shared materials. What occurred in one classroom basically happened in the others, with personalities and preferences of style among the teachers creating some diversity in the experience for the children. Karissa, the least experienced of the four participants, was in her fourth year in the district as a first-grade teacher. Prior to that she had been a substitute teacher for 2 years. Penny had taught a total of 7 years, 4 as a first-grade teacher and 3 as a Title I federally funded teacher for underprivileged individuals in the first grade.

Site II was in a kindergarten through fourth-grade building within a higher end socioeconomic setting. Here only 14% of the combined students qualified for the free lunch program. This school district had been recognized as excellent by the state in which the study occurred, as compared to the at risk rating held by the district of Site I. Darcee was a teacher with 12 years of experience, 6 in second grade and 6 in first grade. She was in her second year at this site. She, like Janelle, would be moving with the same group of children to second grade next year, what is called *looping*. Janelle was in her 10th year of teaching, with 9 of them as a second-grade teacher. This was her first year as a first-grade teacher. Their grade level

had a very loose relationship as they implemented the curricula of the district. Their classrooms and function reflected their personal styles and priorities, with occasional shared themes for the social studies and science. They planned their weeks independently of one another and had materials in abundance, eliminating the need to network with one another for the sharing of resources as the teachers of Site I did.

UNCOVERING DEFINITION, FORM, AND VALUE OF PLAY

Defining *play* is difficult and evokes multifaceted responses. Garvey's defining study of play described it as (a) enjoyable, (b) lacking extrinsic goals, (c) freely chosen, (d) actively engaging, and (e) having "certain systematic relations to what is not play" (1990, pp. 4–5). This final point as a descriptor was what made the topic of play "intriguing" according to Garvey. The relationship with "creativity, problem solving, language learning, the development of social roles, and a number of other cognitive and social phenomena continues to motivate research" (1990, p. 5). In other words, play has a leading role in the development of what is considered non-play, which is why the value of play in the school environment continues to be a consideration. Her definition of play served as an overarching understanding of the parameters of this study. For framing the analysis of the teachers' definitions, I included the understandings of play and its relationship to work as spawned through Polito (1994). Her research showed how play and work were organized in a kindergarten classroom through discreet and overt messages established by the teacher in a classroom where "work and play co-existed officially in the kindergarten" (p. 51). In her ethnographic research, she noted that from the teacher's perspective, the work of the studied classroom was defined, assigned, and required, as compared to the play, which was indefinite, chosen, and optional (Polito, 1994, p. 51–52). Spodek's research showed that from the children's perspective "work is seen as something students must do and play is seen as something they can do" (as cited in Marshall, 1994, p. 43).

Defining Play

When I asked the four first-grade teachers to define the term *play*, it was interesting to note that they shared their definitions tentatively and carefully. Janelle stated, "I never really thought about that until I was reading your [consent] form ... hmmm ..." She explicated that play was

something that is important to them, that they want to do; it's not quite forced upon [them], I guess, [but] student led. You don't have to say "You have to go play this," because that won't be important or enjoyable or lasting.

This statement reflected the three elements of play found in Polito's (1994) descriptors of play: indefinite ("something that is important to them"), chosen ("that they want to do"), and optional ("it's not quite forced upon" them). The optional, chosen, indefinite nature of play that Polito recognized in her descriptive terms and that was reflected in the work of Garvey also were suggested by Darcee, who determined that play was "being able to do things freely that you enjoy.... Just being able to do more free choice." These teachers from Site II were in agreement that play could not be definite, assigned, or required, which were Polito's criteria for what children consider work. Both of the teachers of Site I, however, saw play as something that they could direct in a mediated manner as they each merged form with definition in their responses. In answer to my question "How would you define *play*?" Penny attributed to the definition of play the idea of "any unstructured time that the kids have during the day ... that includes more than recess." As she shared her ideas of play further, it was clear that "unstructured" included teacher-directed activities that would include games or exploration of manipulatives as a total class. Karissa's tentative definition was more nebulous. She pointed out that play "can mean a lot of different things depending on the context," and she considered play at recess and play within a class assignment that encouraged the use of the imagination. She added that "play can be just for fun, for physical exercise, or just to relax, whatever." The child's *option* to play—or not—seemed an irrelevant feature in her definition of play.

Forms of Play in School

In reviewing the responses related to form, I identified the examples of play provided by the teachers and analyzed them utilizing Piaget's (1951/1972) types of play. Although Piaget identified each of these types as evident in certain periods of development (sensorimotor during infancy, symbolic or representational predominant from about 2 to 6, and games with rules occurring at school age)

we have to keep in mind that this progression is not the same for any two children and is by no means cut in stone. These stages have been identified as a typical course of development for many children ... [but] at various times and for various reasons, children go back and forth between the stages. (Owocki, 1999, p. 12)

The teachers' examples were categorized as sensory, symbolic, or game. They were identified as child- or teacher-initiated, because within the forms of play described by the teachers there were included teacher-initiated and teacher-mediated activities. The results are briefly shared here; a more detailed analysis is available in the original documentation (Ranz-Smith, 2001).

Sensory play experiences, such as those found through fingerpaints, water, or sand play in preschool and kindergarten classrooms, were evident in only one of

the four first-grade classrooms: Janelle provided a sand table, open-ended art materials, and a snack center. Darcee indicated that she had started the year with a water table “but it took up so much space ... and I had never used one in first grade, so we got rid of it. Plus it was one of the old ones ... big, bulky, and I didn’t like it.” Playground events, as described by all four teachers, were categorized as sensory play and included the rhythms of jumping rope, running, galloping, and skipping with no apparent goal or competition.

Symbolic play, in which representational thought figures into the talk and activity of play, was easily identified by the participants. Examples provided by the teachers included acting out family, school, animals, super heroes, and stories (such as *Little Red Hen*, *Three Pigs*, etc.). The utilization of manipulatives for role playing included puppetry, blocks (used for race track and city building), and farm representational play. Although three of the teachers shared observations from recess time or teacher-initiated reenactments within the classroom, Janelle’s teaching function allowed for open-ended play during the regular class time, so her examples were detailed accounts revealing more than the one-word descriptors from playground observations. She said:

For example, they got into a dog shop. They were all dogs. Back then, watching it, it was amazing. I wouldn’t have made that up as a little center, but they went ahead and did that ... and they had it organized. Some were dogs, some were the clerks, and some were the feeders.

Game play, bound by rules, was child initiated on the playground and teacher initiated in the classroom. Examples from this study included funnel basketball, four-square, kickball, soccer, tag, and clapping games. Although the teachers each shared ideas of play as found in games, it was noteworthy that Penny suggested eight teacher-directed games compared to zero from the teachers at Site II and only one from her teaching partner. Game play was a major element of this teacher’s strategies in educating young children. She indicated that even math flash cards had become a game for her students “because I’m not putting a paper in front of them and saying, ‘Do these.’ They’re working with a friend, and they get to decide how they want to do it.” Kariisa, though, was more concerned about games, cautioning, “If you try something playful in the middle of the day, or in the morning or in the earlier afternoon, you’ll have a hard time getting settled back down and moving on to the next thing.”

Value of Play

Finding value in play seems to be universal, and with these four individuals it was no different. My questions asked the teachers to consider whether play had a meaningful place in the life of children and whether curriculum and proficiency goals of

education could be fulfilled through play. The teachers individually suggested the social–emotional and cognitive possibilities of play as shown in Table 1. Each teacher, in her own way, expressed value to be found in play. At Site I, Karissa saw the potential of learning from play within all domains, and her coworker Penny expressed the positive aspect of divergent thinking and engagement afforded by play. From Site II, Darcee saw the adaptive features of play, pointing out the natural way in which learning occurs through play. Her colleague Janelle observed the increases in vocabulary and the manipulation of language, in addition to social and curriculum-related understandings, brought about through play.

Each teacher in her own way expressed value to be found in play. Countering the value of play, however, they expressed concerns regarding classroom time devoted to play. Although this is not a quantitative study, in reviewing the text from the interviews I found that for Darcee alone, had positive statements related to play were outnumbered by her negative statements. Features of play were identified by Darcee as “inappropriate ... when they get aggressive.” She also had determined the need to exclude centers of activity from her learning environment because “[for] the ones who really had a distraction problem ... it was just way too much for them to handle all that movement and noise and stuff going on in the room. They could not do anything quietly.” Penny felt that in taking time for play she would be shortchanging the instructional time necessary for proficiency:

I'm afraid if I didn't ... at least try to cover some of the things that I hadn't done [prior to testing for proficiency that] I would feel horribly guilty, like I haven't done what I should have done for the kids.

Karissa pointed out that play intrudes and can “[interrupt] the way the class is going.” Staying under control and maintaining a focus on work projects were essential in the school environment according to this teacher, as well as Penny and Darcee.

The obstacles that Janelle identified in having play within the school environment were not due to what “some other people might say [of it being] ‘too loud’ and might think it’s what they consider chaotic even though it’s not,” but were related to some of the children’s choices related to television characters being inappropriate. An administrative ban on, and a personal discomfort with, the violence of animated characters caused her to impose one major limitation on children’s media-related play. Although the four teachers found value in play in relation to childhood, there were factors that ruled out play in the classroom that was chosen, optional, and indefinite for three of the four participants. As the study revealed, Janelle was the one teacher who risked including play (with one limitation in terms of theme) despite the noted concerns of talk, noise, activity, and uncertainties.

TABLE 1
Participants' Views of the Value of Play

<i>Site I</i>	<i>Site II</i>
<p>Penny</p> <p>“The kids have to have time when they can set their own rules. They’ve got to have that time to learn to get along with each other ... all those skills that you’re going to need when you get older and when you get into the work force. All those skills are learned through play.”</p> <p>“It’s so engaging and it’s so child centered. It’s their ideas ... they’re more likely to learn through that than if I presented the same topic or curriculum my way, if they’re coming up with it ... they’ll be so much more interested.”</p> <p>Karissa</p> <p>With play’s ability to “increase creativity and imagination ... you will hit, hopefully hit, some other curriculum areas as well. Then you could go and extend.”</p> <p>“I mean, play will help you reach some objectives for them to learn the objectives [found] on the proficiency test.”</p> <p>We “let the children show their own creativity and their imagination. You always want their imagination working. You want them thinking and that always leads to other things.”</p> <p>“They learn so many things from play ... you have your physical things: your gross motor skills, fine motor skills, all that. They learn socialization, how to adapt to different situations.”</p>	<p>Darcee</p> <p>“The kids get so much more out of it because it’s right where they are. It’s their norm and their way of thinking and it’s easy for them to adapt to; even those who are struggling can adapt to that very well.”</p> <p>“Children feel freer to express themselves or to do things when it’s more of a play aspect than when it’s a written work-type assignment. When they feel there [are] limitations or they’re confined to that, they can’t express themselves.”</p> <p>Janelle</p> <p>Play reveals “how language works, if they’re reading something in that it doesn’t sound right, I think that playing helps, they say ‘Wait a minute, I wouldn’t have said it that way!’ and they can go back.... So I think that helps tremendously ... [with] fluency.”</p> <p>“Mathematically and scientifically ... they can come up with so much on their own that fits into our curriculum.”</p> <p>“By seeing the experiences of other children and getting involved with that [through play] with the other children, I think they can gain the knowledge they need for ... everything ... [and] they’re more motivated to do even more elaborate ideas. It increases their vocabulary, it increases their interaction with each other, and acceptance of each other.”</p>

Viewing Play as a Stronghold or Barrier to Learning?

Among the four teachers it seemed that there were current circumstances or background factors that powerfully influenced their attitudes toward play as both a curricular stronghold and barrier in the learning process. Factors influencing their positions included ones attributed to personal preference, childhood memories, training, responses of administrators and parents, reactions of fellow teachers, and student behaviors. District and state requirements in the form of formal curricular expectations and off-year proficiency testing for the state in which they worked were viewed only in a negative context as related to the notion of learning through play. The data revealed the teachers' positions regarding influential factors that were strongholds and those that were barriers to play in the classroom (see Table 2). In terms of curricular strongholds they all, with the exception of Darcee, held personal preferences and childhood memories that strengthened the position of play in relation to learning. Training was perceived as a potential source of beliefs in the value of play as related to learning, but Janelle did not find that her own school experiences in college supported this. There was no doubt that the curricular expectations of their districts and the proficiency requirements of the state in which they taught were perceived as unsupportive to learning through play in the classroom.

Administration. Two of the four teachers felt that administrators were open to the notion of learning through play. Darcee observed that her administrators gave her much teaching freedom as long as she met goals required of the students, indicating "they really view you as a professional and they know you're going to get done what you need to get done as long as you're getting the curriculum done.... Your manner of accomplishing it is up to you." Karissa, too, felt that "they like to see the hands-on types of activities, but I would say they're pretty neutral.... I would say it would depend how you're using [play] and how they see you using it," explaining that open-ended use of hands-on materials as in play would not be as

TABLE 2
Perceptions of Strongholds and Barriers to Play in the Classroom

<i>Influential Factor</i>	<i>Stronghold</i>	<i>Barrier</i>
Administration	Darcee, Karissa	Janelle, Penny
Childhood memories	Janelle, Karissa, Penny	Darcee
Classroom management	Janelle	Darcee, Karissa, Penny
Colleagues	Darcee, Janelle, Karissa	Penny
Curricular expectations		Darcee, Janelle, Karissa, Penny
Parents	Darcee	Janelle, Karissa, Penny
Personal preference	Janelle, Karissa, Penny	Darcee
Training	Darcee, Karissa, Penny	Janelle

acceptable as teacher-directed use of materials. When incorporated into specific tasks, hands-on materials had administrative approval. This was similar to her own perspective in that she later said that play “should be [part of the classroom experience] depending on what context you’re using it in ... it should be especially in the younger grades.” Her statement reflected a belief in classroom play that she felt was shared by her administrators within a “using it” framework.

In contrast, Penny stated that administrators were

very discouraging, not just here in my building, but the whole district. You are in academic emergency with your scores so [you] “got to cut all the fun stuff out.” In an ideal situation you wouldn’t have to worry about what the administrators are saying, what the curriculum guides say ... and can do what the kids need.

Contrasting Penny’s thought, Darcee at Site II felt that “even though [administrators] have said stuff to us, there is a lot of freedom with how we want to teach. As long as we show that the children are learning to read and learning, they will let us be.” Janelle, though she felt the same degree of teaching freedom as her partner, responded with her perceptions that administrators were not in favor of play in the classroom:

Definitely. It’s more of this is not playtime. They don’t want to see that. They want to see the children involved in the reading. I don’t feel that they consider the acting out as educational.... They want to see them focused on reading and writing, not playing as much. Basically, he said he does not want us to play ... even the formal type of play.

Janelle continued,:

If the test scores go up, I’m hoping that we can be able to change [the administrator’s inability to see the educational aspects of play] because as we bring it in more ... and show why it’s important ... and all the children are reading I think it will be more encouraged if they can see it’s tied to reading.

For Janelle, the reading–playing connection was securely juxtaposed:

They feel they are reading, they can act it out ... and starting with the drawing and retelling it starts the reading process so we can get to more interesting literature [and move] into the retelling and the reenactment of it.

Childhood memories. In terms of play being viewed as a curricular stronghold or barrier, questions from the second interview asked the teachers to reflect on their personal memories of play, with no suggestion of a relationship to their current classroom environments. It was interesting to discover that the types of play

that figured into their personal childhood memories seemed to be reflected in their views of the potential for play as a feature of their classrooms. Much of Darcee's reflections of her own past experiences of play were tied to outdoor play interactions with siblings and natural phenomena, with no memories of adult involvement or awareness of the type of play experienced. This seemed to be an indication of why the idea of adult-scaffolded play or free play within the classroom seemed to be in some ways foreign to her. Janelle, Karissa, and Penny, however, each made references to some level of parental involvement in their childhood memories of play, with the adults being either facilitators or actual participants in their play. Karissa further observed, "I don't remember doing much play in the classroom."

What were seen as features of play in the classrooms of these teachers seemed to mirror their own memories of what their childhood play entailed. Janelle, whose current classroom was set up with a store and blocks as part of the play options, had vivid recall of role playing and representational play through building: "With my sister I used to play store with a cash register," dress up in the toy room down in the basement, and "I loved putting things together with brick blocks." Penny, who had a strong commitment to classroom games, had strong recall of game play, remembering hockey games with her twin brother during which they "made up our own rules" and board games with her parents. Karissa remembered playing a lot of sports growing up, plus having "woods in the backyard and we'd go build [with parent help] little tents and tree houses and stuff, and again we'd play house and pretend." The fact that she used to have discomfort in school as a child speaking before a group caused her to encourage her own students to engage in warm times of interactive pretending during which she and students assumed the voices of story characters.

Classroom management. The behaviors associated with play were deemed as barriers to learning in many instructional circumstances related to classroom management. Only Janelle felt there were no problematic associations with play in this regard. Her teaching partner Darcee disagreed through her individual interview. "We always have a couple students that can't handle it, because they can't control the parameters which they have to work with or something," said Darcee. She continued:

They just get too excited or too, um, rambunctious ... the ones who had a distraction problem—it was just way too much for them to handle all that movement and noise and stuff going on in the room. They could not do anything quietly.

Penny saw overflow behaviors from free play at recess interfering with classroom functions because "they don't have those skills to play cooperatively; [it's] continual arguments" and resultant "poking somebody and pushing somebody." She elaborated:

A lot of kids aren't allowed to go out. "What did you do on spring break?" "Nothing. I watched TV." They don't know how to play ... board games; Duck, Duck, Goose. My family played games all the time. Their version of play is Sega. They can't follow the rules or play together.

Karissa maintained that

depending on the level of your students, some students might not be able to stay under control ... or when you were finished extending their play, they would not be able to settle back down to get back to working.

In her daily observations of the unofficial play that occurred in the classroom, Karissa indicated that "if it's interrupting the way the class is going, I will address it and I'll ask them to sit down or I'll say, 'Now's not the time, save it for recess.'"

Colleagues. Each of the four teachers felt that fellow teachers in their grade level supported them in terms of the notion of play within the classroom context. Only Penny remarked about the grade levels beyond the first grade, saying that

in the primary hall, we encourage play.... Can't make it all work, work, work. We need to just play sometimes. We were supposed to do an experiment tomorrow with the language teacher, but we decided the kids need a break.... So we just are playing a game. The intermediate grades will sometimes ask us, "What are you teaching down there?" So you see, school is not for play.

Curricular expectations. The teachers all felt that curricular expectations formed a barrier to the idea of learning through play in the classroom, but Karissa and Janelle responded in a very different way than Darcee and Penny. The first two reacted with a tendency to shrug off the demands as just part of the teaching scene, whereas the other two felt an obligation to work through a year under the yoke of curricular objectives. Janelle indicated that despite the fact that "you have to get this done and this done and this done," she had resolved the teacher's dilemma voiced by the others of expectations versus time. Rather than stopping with her own question of "Where's the time to do all the extensions?," she continued with her own answer, saying, "I can see all that's required of us.... You learn to ignore it." Karissa echoed this sentiment with the fact that curricular guides and teacher manuals give you "very specific directions, and I do not always follow them." She asserted, too, that "play will help you reach some objectives for them to learn [what's tested] on the proficiency tests, but when you're actually taking" the test, play can be somewhat of an interference. The difference between these two teachers in terms of implementation, however, was very apparent. Janelle believed strongly in the need to accommodate child interest and the propensity to play in

ways that were non-directed compared to Karissa, who believed that play was something to be “used” to fulfill a teacher’s instructional obligations.

For Darcee the teacher obligation that she perceived from the curriculum guides and the sense of interference she felt from play caused her to be very committed to creating a work environment. She differed from Janelle and Karissa in her response to the abundance of curricular expectations by operating with, as Darcee said,

the fear of not getting in the course of curriculum that you have to cover for proficiencies.... And that’s sad, ‘cause you have to teach so they can take these tests—and they’re not playing when they take these tests—so they really need to know how to do the other type of the stuff (which is not the “funnest” stuff in the world), but that’s what they have to learn how to do. That’s, in a sense, their real life.

This same fear and resignation in reaction to proficiencies was what drove Penny’s instruction:

We have to go there and I hate to ... I don’t want that to get in the way of my classroom, because I refuse to teach what’s exactly on the test, but you know, you get down to February and the beginning of March and you know these tests are coming up. All those playthings are cut out of the curriculum because you literally feel like you don’t have time and it’s not worthwhile to do that and you hate to be that way, but it happens every single year. Drill! Drill! Drill! For the few weeks before that, and, in the other grade levels where there’s more material to cover, they’re feeling it even worse. Then we are thinking all year, “I can’t do all these fun things.”

Penny added, “The math program I’ve been piloting this year has no play except for what I bring into it.” Although Penny felt that the conflict between the curricular demands and the children’s need for play were resolved somewhat by incorporating fun games into the daily procedures and lessons, she did regret the lack of centertime for play: “To be honest, I can’t do [play through centers] everyday and teach the curriculum they’re telling me I have to teach.... I wish there was more time for completely unstructured ‘Here’s your choices. Go for it.’” When considering the reality of student academic performance, the teachers expressed beliefs about play that contradicted their statements favoring play as a mechanism of learning. Their comments established a link between their own direct teaching of the curriculum of their local districts and their students’ performance on the proficiencies.

Parents. Janelle and Darcee, positioned in a well-to-do suburban setting, had more to say about parents challenging their teaching methodology than Karissa and Penny seemed to have. Janelle had experienced during the year of the study

one conference in which a parent had said something about her classroom being noisy: “I said, ‘Well, some days it is and some days it’s not. And noise is not bad if they’re communicating with one another.’” She sadly observed that from a parent’s point of view “school is not for play, and unfortunately, it seems a lot of home is not for play as well, so they don’t see the benefits either way.” She noted that one of the first-grade parents had complained to a teacher who wasn’t part of the study about blocks in first grade. Darcee reminded me that parents have strong feelings about what the school day should look like. From her conferences, one common complaint she had heard from parents was that the recess was too short. She felt the request for more recess endorsed parent notions of the need for free play. Karissa’s only comment about parents related to the fact that they “don’t seem to be as involved with their children as my parents were. It’s different.” Penny felt that parents were in a large part responsible for her students’ inability to interact with one another in game settings.

Personal preference. Penny expressed the challenge of keeping children in total group activity for the majority of the day, with few times set aside for individual performance. She stated, “It’s for me as much as for them. I can’t stand to just do worksheets. I have to sometimes do mind games, thinking games.” Although Karissa kept her answers brief, she conveyed the preference for infusing a teaching day with play-type activity that was orchestrated by the teacher. Darcee felt play was better left on the playground “because I guess I like things a little more structured. Not as structured as some teachers. I guess you can tell from today, I’m not a major stickler on silence like some teachers can be.” She went on to say, “I know it’s something that’s very important, but then trying to fit in everything that I know I have to get done, and try to put in that play aspect, is hard for me.” Darcee, realizing her personal limits and the amount of curriculum for which she felt responsible, explained:

It’s hard for me to focus in on a reading group and concentrate. I had started up in the beginning of the year with a bunch of centers and trying to rotate. It was very confusing and very loud and I had a hard time having it organized to where I could teach and keep kids focused at the same time.

She also revealed personal limits in terms of her creativity:

Janelle’s our creative teacher. She can come up with a lot of stuff, but I’m not as creative so, you know, when people give me ideas, I say, “Oh yeah, that would be good” ... but for me to come up with them on my own, I’m just not the creative type.

In contrast, Janelle expressed that

I'd like to see more of it, in fact, more pretend, and I'd love to be able to fit it in where they have more time to play. I'd love to have a dramatic center, dress up ... you know, dress up as characters and do that kind of thing. I wish we could.

During another interview Janelle indicated that she would (with more time and money) "buy costumes and, you know, have a little staging area for them to have plays and probably for their stores I would have more shelves and boxes than I do."

Training. Janelle, who of the four teachers held play in the highest regard in terms of belief and practice, claimed, in terms of her training, "It wasn't discussed. I think it would be neat to have a class, why it's needed and what are the different things you can bring into the room so that it's encouraged." This teacher had no recall of any training in the value of play: "None. Not in graduate or undergraduate." In keeping with her notion of "using" play as a means of focus and a means of understanding abstract ideas, Karissa felt that in her educational experiences she "was encouraged. I mean, most of the classes I had, they stressed hands-on types of things to use." She recollected that her kiddie lit class "talked about dramatic play and stuff like that." However, Penny, who was certified in kindergarten, stressed:

My kindergarten instructors in college were huge on the importance of play in kindergarten ... and in my student teaching that I did in kindergarten that was so important. I have kept that with me. I haven't felt like I have to be constantly drilling these kids. I've gone on with fun. I had to write a paper on the importance of play and I wondered, "Why do I have to do this?" But after you get out and you're actually teaching you realize right away, how important it is.

Translating her training into practice, she ascribed freely chosen play activity to the kindergarten level. Having gone on to first grade, Penny affirmed emphatically that she had "gone on with fun" as a means of helping children transition because "first grade is a different world. You learn, 'Now's the time to learn, learn, learn.' Everything changes once you leave kindergarten.... It's so frustrating." Darcee was equally aware that her background experiences contributed to her perception of play's value: "Oh, my training definitely encouraged me to, but when reality set in it was more discouraging. You couldn't do as much. I guess I felt I wasn't getting as much covered through that as through other ways."

SUMMARY OF THE FACTORS VIEWED AS STRONGHOLDS AND BARRIERS

Although these four teachers identified certain factors that made play seem either a stronghold or barrier to learning, there was no sense of a correlation between pro-

fessed habits of practice and the teachers' identification of supports or deterrents to play. To some extent, this could have been due to the personal interpretation and definition of play with which each teacher operated as they responded to the probes. In a simple numerical comparison, Darcee, who had a high commitment to accomplishing instruction with expectations of individual performance through worksheets and creative writing in small and total group meetings, appeared to be very similar in her perceptions of play as a stronghold as compared to Janelle, who incorporated free play in her classroom on a daily basis. Interestingly, for all their explicated differences in practice, Darcee perceived a numerically equal number of strongholds for play as Janelle. The strengths that Darcee identified, however, were exterior to what went on within the classroom, whereas for Janelle, the key interior factors of personal preference and classroom management were identified as strongholds. The fact that Janelle was the only one of the four individuals with a positive perception of classroom management in relation to play caused this variable perhaps to be a decisive feature in what made play a rarity in the other first-grade classrooms of the study. Janelle stood alone in viewing the behaviors associated with play as a stronghold for her instructional goals.

Another major finding was that all of the teachers were uniform in feeling that curricular expectations inhibited their sense of viewing play as a stronghold in the learning process. With the teachers' sense that there was no time for play in the classroom because of all that was expected of first graders these days, it was interesting to discover that the first-grade objectives of both sites, as formally adopted by their respective boards of education, suggested play as a means of implementing the curriculum. Instructional methods in three of the four classrooms revealed a disparity from the written intent of the curricular materials, with the exception of Janelle's. Although she did not cite the documents as a resource for making play a credible part of her learning environment, Janelle adhered to the philosophical intent of her district to be appropriate in the educational processes of the classroom. Apparently, she responded to the sense of burdensome curriculum and proficiency demands in a way that still maintained her value of play for young children. From the analysis of the curricular documents from the two districts it was evident that, although the teachers considered curriculum expectations to be barriers for the inclusion of play in the learning process, there were indications that play was indeed a welcome part of the districts' curricular designs. Although there were references to role playing under oral communication in the reading documents of Site I and the language arts documents of Site II, only Penny alluded to support for play from the curriculum by saying, "they encourage an acting out of different things like community workers."

Further investigation of Site I revealed that under the application section for a goal to "participate in dramatization" under oral communication, the suggestions of "puppetry, choral reading, reciting nursery rhymes or poetry, plays, housekeeping, corner store, etc." were written into both the kindergarten and first-grade lev-

els of instruction. By second grade there were more formal expectations for dramatization, with impromptu and rehearsed plays, skits, puppet shows, and role playing. Throughout the three grades under oral communication there was a goal to experiment with verbal language, which included using nonsense words (a form of word play considered by Garvey, 1990). "Playtime," along with "work, cleanup, murals, art, plays," was considered a multidisciplinary means of learning cooperation for both kindergarten and first grade. Although the terms *housekeeping* and *corner store* being written into the curriculum suggested times of open-ended play for the students of this community, as did the seeming endorsement of "playtime" through its inclusion in the document, there were no such environmental features in the two observed classrooms of this site over the course of the semester. The two teachers also made no reference to such inclusions. The lack of teacher awareness that these aspects of play were part of the formal curriculum of the district prevented their seeing the district expectations in the context of a stronghold to play. Based upon their interview comments, the teaching processes of Karissa and Penny did not reflect the intent of the district-adopted goals and recommendations in regard to play.

Within the context of the goals and objectives of the Site II district, the word *play* again emerged. Although the language arts curriculum shared the idea of dramatization under oral communication, it was the social studies curriculum in which issues of work and play were identified. In the reality of the board-adopted curriculum of the district there appeared an understood "work before play" emphasis that was evident in Janelle's instructional practice. Under the kindergarten suggestions for techniques that would assist children in employing principles found in economics, as related to choice time and centers, it was stated that the "children must complete teacher assigned tasks before choosing from activities in the classroom" and, once at an assigned center, they "may choose from various activities." Again, as a means of enhancing economic understandings, the kindergarten and first-grade teachers were to "create an environment where needs and wants are understood," with examples coming from a "classroom store, classroom community, or barter for craft items to complete a project." This suggestion of role playing made Janelle's classroom store role playing an endorsed addition to her classroom. The math curriculum gave preschoolers "thematic units involving imaginative play scenarios including grocery store, pizza parlor, ice cream parlor, etc.," but such an idea was not continued beyond this earliest level. Science provided sensory play opportunities for the preschooler and kindergartner, but the first and second graders were to participate in defined experiments. Of course, in both sites, games were learned in physical education. Art and music were strictly for skill development. Whereas Janelle seemed to follow the philosophical intent of the goals and objectives of her district, Darcee seemed to have found a teaching solution that helped her maintain her preference for a more directive, work-oriented type of instruction. Janelle, with her openness to the positive possibilities of play, also found

herself drawn to child-initiated products in her work-related activities. The worksheet-based activities of the other three teachers expected correct responses that reflected a control mechanism when compared to the open-ended creations that utilized a variety of materials from Janelle's students. Janelle's solution was "trying to find out what the children were interested in ... and what would fit for them." She added, "That's one of my goals, to get something that's organized enough for administration and yet unorganized enough for imagination."

ANALYSIS, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions of play held by first-grade teachers and the implications of such for the classroom. As the teachers shared their beliefs in relation to the value and characteristics of play, they addressed both the limits and the strengths of play in their actual practice. In the data I found points of agreement embedded in their beliefs as to the value of play in relation to growth and development of young learners, but they did not make a corresponding provision for such in their descriptions of their own classrooms, with the exception of one participant. Conceptions and perceptions of play were similar in relation to its value, but the teacher-held view of play's definition and form posed points of variation in the comparative analysis process. In discerning the role that play took in the classroom, it was quickly recognized that there were basically two differing views of play held by the teacher participants. These varying perceptions of the definition of and place for childhood play resulted in differing levels of willingness to include child-initiated play within the education context of the school setting. Although the four teachers shared the belief that child-initiated play enhances learning, which seemingly would lead to a facilitation of play within the pedagogy of each participant, that belief was constrained by circumstances and expectations that overrode three of the teachers' abilities to realize the learning potential of child-sponsored play in their actual individual practices. Their understandings of its definition and form varied in ways that influenced the self-professed daily decisions they made in their teaching practice. (See Figure 2.)

The teachers of Site I defined play in a way that included a work-play context that made the defined, assigned, and required features (considered work) of the day fun, and in such a manner they were using play to accomplish work. Karissa and Penny, however, made no accommodation for open-ended, child-initiated play in their practice. Play in its child-sponsored form was relegated to the playground. Instead, they both incorporated teacher-initiated play as an aspect of their instruction to maintain learner interest and a sense of fun in the teaching-learning process. As an instructional strategy, they found ways to infuse teacher-directed play throughout the day's work that were intended to help keep the children focused and engaged as a total group for the majority of the school day.

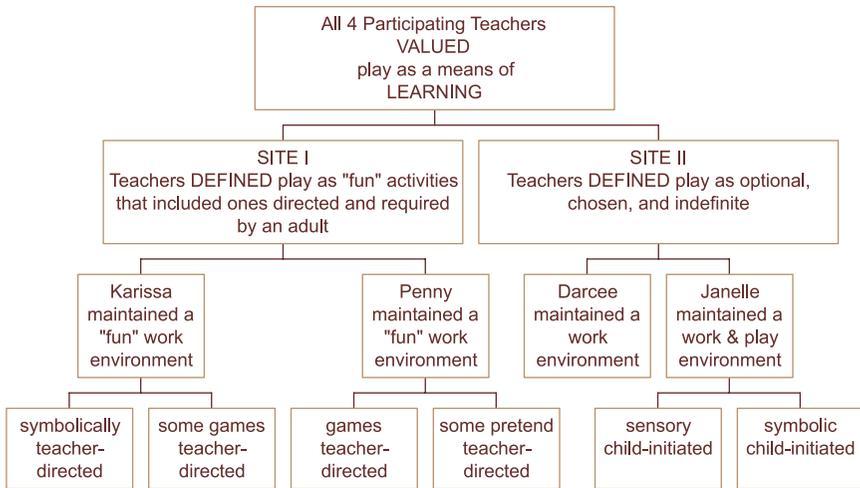


FIGURE 2 Flow chart of professed beliefs about play and pedagogy.

The teachers of Site II, who strictly defined play as that which was undefined, chosen, and optional, saw play as a spontaneous occurrence and as a product of child initiation and thought. Working autonomously within the same school setting, they made consequential decisions to include (in Janelle's case) or exclude (in Darcee's case) play in the classroom. The teachers of Site II, though sharing a similar definition of play, revealed two disparate learning environments at the site: Darcee's class was work-centered, with unofficial play intruding despite teacher correctives; Janelle's class made work and play both officially endorsed activities.

What predicated these pedagogical decisions to exclude or include child-initiated play may have been rooted in the four participants' understandings of the definition and form of play. The participants were also impacted by perceptions of play as a curricular stronghold or barrier as discussed earlier. These perceptions resulted from the influence of administrators, the teachers' own memories of childhood play, considerations of classroom management, colleagues, curriculum, parents, personal preference, and training. The one exception to this apparent dissonance between belief and practice was Janelle, but even she was mindful of constraints in her position as a first-grade teacher, as child-chosen play was an option only after the work of each morning was completed. Providing an environment conducive to play recognizes the child's need to experience, manipulate, and construct knowledge through such a mode of play. Janelle, as an educator, attended to the potential of what was available within the individual and group contexts of interactive play frames of reference to discover how to make more meaningful the processes and products of the education of young learners. She sought to offer the

temporal, spatial, and relational considerations for play experiences that developed meaningful work experiences to enhance play.

Although Janelle found play to be a beneficial inclusion in her first-grade program, the other three teachers felt it to be intrusive to the time constraints and classroom management aspects of their teaching day. Interestingly, the three teachers who claimed to have had training on the role of play in learning were overtaken by what they perceived to be the focus of their career found in the curriculum guides and teaching manuals. Janelle, who professed to watch and listen to the children, maintained a practice that was informed by her students' needs and interests as well as via the traditional means relied upon by others. She tried to maintain a daily activity flow that moved from teacher's work assignment to children's play choices. She was unique among the four participants in that she provided her students with the opportunity to interact within the context of the playground of their minds during regular classroom experiences. Surprisingly, she was also unique in having no recall of specific instruction related to the topic of play in her degree programs. In researching these first-grade teachers' perceptions of play, it became evident that the practical implications of child-initiated sensory, symbolic, and game-based play challenged their beliefs and understandings of the role of play in childhood educational settings.

Beyond theoretical discussions, findings of this interview study suggest that, through our preservice educational plans and coursework, we need to establish a sense of the relevance of play in learning that secures its place beyond theoretical discussions into everyday practice. Three of the four participating teachers (who professed to have a preservice "walk out" knowledge of the role of play in learning), did not establish within their classroom contexts a sense of the relevance of play in learning. They each felt compelled to totally dominate their learning environments with teacher- and curriculum-based directives once actually engaged in the field in everyday practice. The one first-grade teacher who claimed having no background of studies in play during her training was the one individual who made room for play and choice in her classroom. Her decisions were based upon her intuitive understandings of the value of play from her own childhood and parenting.

In the data there also seemed to be a relationship between childhood experiences with play and the type of play that a teacher encouraged or permitted within or outside of the classroom. Janelle, with her block and store play as a child, had the same within her classroom. Darcee, who had played in the woods far removed from adult influence, believed play should not occur within the parameters of adult influence. Penny, with her twin brother, had been engaged in many games as a child and held memories of her parents leading them in games as well as playing games with her sibling that allowed for the negotiation of rules and times of play. Karissa's discomfort with public speaking as a child caused her to take her childhood enjoyment of role playing and create warm times of teacher-directed role

playing. Each teacher's childhood experiences were reflected in her interview comments defining play's role in the first-grade classroom.

Given these findings, an additional data analysis was framed with the realization that the varying degrees of play's inclusion and/or exclusion in terms of practice could be predicated upon factors identified within the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Found within this theory, originating from research of attitude formation, is the recognition that in terms of normative beliefs there can be societal pressures and influences (or lack of) that cause individuals to operate within a context that differs from their stated beliefs. The theory of reasoned action suggests that one who purportedly supports the importance of play would in fact include play within the context of learning and instruction so long as normative beliefs and the ensuing motivation to comply with those would substantiate subjective norms held by the individual. (See Figure 3.)

With a disparity between the professed beliefs held by the teachers in relation to the value of play and their subsequent attitudes to the behavior related to play, in terms of the theory, there existed an intent to include or exclude play. As related to the diversity in actual practice, I examined what factors accounted for the differences. The barriers for Kristin, Penny, and Darcee were such that, though they each professed a belief in the importance of play (as reflected in Karissa's statement that "they learn so many things from play,"), they had negative attitudes regarding the behaviors related to play. Additionally, they perceived parental and administrative opposition to child-initiated play. Darcee's statement that "[play is] just way too much for them to handle ... [they're] too excited or rambunctious" reflected an attitude that would disallow play in the learning environment. Penny's comment that in "the ideal situation you wouldn't have to worry about what the administrators are saying [or] what the curriculum guides say," represented an individual who was motivated to comply with the perceived established procedures. This fostered a subjective norm that reflected that proficiency is accomplished through teacher-directed work and

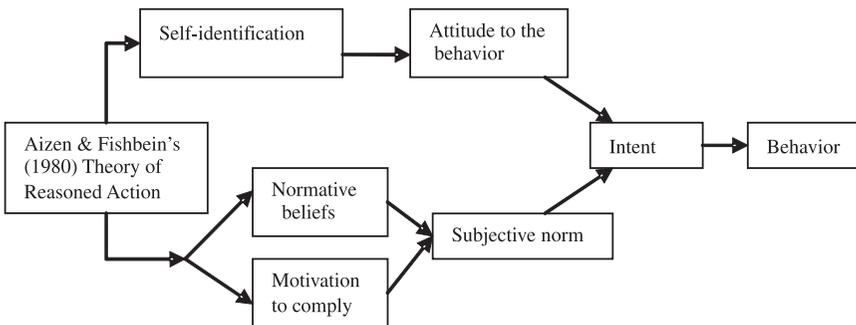


FIGURE 3 Model of Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of reasoned action. (Adapted from Glenn Markle. Class notes for "Attitude Formation and Change in the Classroom," 1996.)

activity rather than child-initiated play. The ultimate intention led to a provision of work to develop skills with no provision of time or space for play. (See Figure 4.)

Janelle, in contrast, substantiated her declarations as to the value of play with a positive attitude toward the talk and movement related to play. Her perceptions of the responses of administrators and parents were in opposition to her belief of play’s value was coupled with a low motivation to comply with normative beliefs. She stated to a parent, “Noise is not bad if they’re communicating with one another.” Concerning implementing a behavior modification program, she stated to her principal, “I’m sure you don’t want me to put one in place when I don’t need it.” Her subjective norm held that proficiency is accomplished by allowing the talk and movement found in play. What she spoke about play in terms of value paralleled what she professed to incorporate within her teaching behaviors. (See Figure 5.)

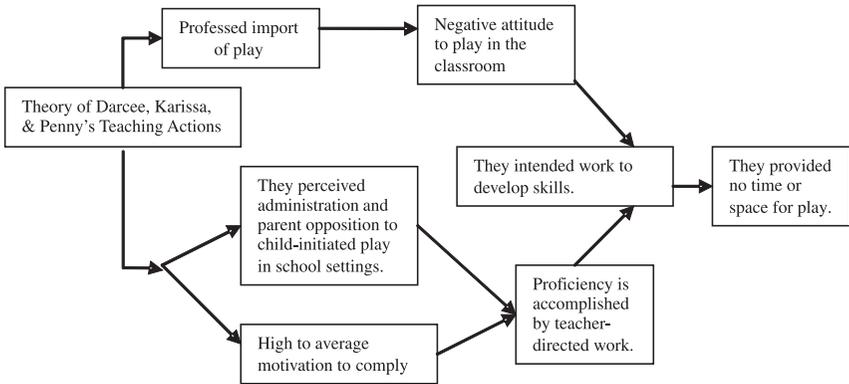


FIGURE 4 Theory of three teachers’ actions related to play.

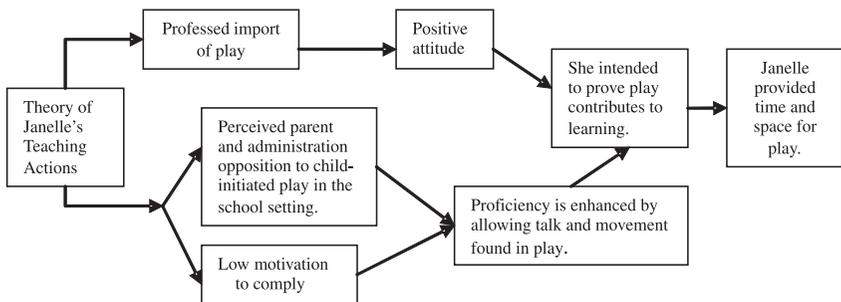


FIGURE 5 Theory of Janelle’s teaching actions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Limitations, of course, existed within the study. With the limited number of participants and the limited quantity of encounters it would seem imperative to pursue the questions of this type of research in a broader manner. This would assist teacher education schools in course development to further facilitate understandings of teacher perceptions of the relationship between play and learning. Additionally, as a researcher and a teacher at the time of the study, my simultaneous positions may have unintentionally compromised some of the directions and findings of the work:

Teachers and researchers not only find themselves in two very different institutional contexts—the public school and the university—but they also frequently carry with them sharply contrasting worldviews that arise from the distinctive problems of practice they encounter in their respective roles. Making the transition from teacher to researcher, therefore, calls for making a potentially drastic change.... (Labaree, 2003, p. 16)

My intent was to work within two worldviews, effectively utilizing the paradigm of impartiality required of the qualitative researcher, but I must admit to having a strong commitment to the importance of play in childhood and throughout life. Although it could be said that a practicing teacher may bring questions unique to a topic, it also could very well be that his or her experiences create an insurmountable bias.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Teachers, such as the first-grade participants of the study, are daily engaged in addressing children's emotional, social, physical, and cognitive needs while addressing the societal demands for instruction. Interpreting the words of the four teachers, there is a sense of responding to the "tyranny of the urgent" found in significant timetables in schools that is creating a frustration and concern for the safeguarding of developmentally appropriate practice. The teachers seemed to find—with the more formalized curriculum, schedules, and assessment—that "compromises must be made by teachers attempting to provide developmentally appropriate education [due to the fact that] ... teachers ... are responsible, in some way, for ensuring that their student body meets certain state requirements for proficiency and knowledge" (Goldstein, 1997, p. 16). In the product-driven climate of the current educational setting, educators often feel compelled to view the process of teaching as a mere scientific delivery system of didactic instruction with minimal time for student interest and initiative. Allowing for play to be part of the learning environment adds a sense of art to the act of teaching. Just as "doing research cannot be viewed as a mechanical performance or a set of activities that

individuals follow in a prescribed or predetermined fashion [since] the activities involved in doing research embody more [the] characteristics of a craft..." (Romberg, 1992, p. 51), the art and science of teaching engages the instructor in a multifaceted approach to the teaching process of interactions that inform, and are informed by, the juxtaposition of the content required by society and the need for a balance of work and play for the learner. Although work events defined by the teacher may be viewed as the science of being an educator, allowing for and responding to the play events of children create a view of the art of being an educator. Merging the two aspects of function leads us into the view of learning as both work and play, teaching as both science and art—in other words, the craft of teaching. Can researchers find other kindergarten and primary teachers who successfully strike a balance between the two seemingly disparate goals to fulfill a Dewey-honored perspective? Are there personality traits, personal backgrounds, and/or environmental features within the educational landscape that lead teachers that play with their students in structured events like Karissa and Penny, that exclude play like Darcee, and that are open to child-directed play like Janelle? Are there others who would echo Janelle's comment that "that's one of my goals, to get something that's organized enough for administration and yet unorganized enough for imagination"?

It can be concluded from this study that each participating teacher held a value for the notion of play similar to that of play theorists. However, the three teachers who had memories of specific education related to play were not equipped to deal with the realities of affording time and place for play, beyond recess, within the context of a school day. Interestingly, classroom management that incorporated child-initiated play was viewed as "doable" by the one member of the study who professed to having no formal training in such an area. This appears to be somewhat of an educational conundrum, a pedagogy/practice gap that needs further study. Pellegrini, Kato, Blatchford, and Baines (2002), in a study of first graders engaged in peer-initiated games on the playground, made the point that "the playground and the first grade classroom are relatively similar niches, with similar demand characteristics; thus competence in one area (the playground) should relate to competence in the other (school, more generally)" (p. 996). The teachers in the present study seemed to understand that there can be a degree of reciprocity between competent play and competent work, but they did not necessarily act on such knowledge within their own classrooms. The challenge arises for those engaged with preservice teachers, whether as instructors or university classroom laboratory teachers, to find what about the instruction and modeling of play-based learning causes it not to be implemented in actual practice once teachers whose beliefs support the role of play in the school setting are faced with the realities of the educational system. The participants of this study who had educational backgrounds in the value of play appeared to have left their understandings of the necessity for child-initiated activity within the confines of the ivory towers of their universities.

The four teacher participants valued play as a vehicle for children's learning but found obstacles to incorporating play into the first-grade classroom. Although they defined and identified types of play, they did not articulate them with any references to play theorists or to the experts in child development who would authenticate their beliefs. This intuitive type of knowledge, though commonly relied upon in teaching practice, does not carry weight with decision makers in this era of science-based research. These teachers also seemed to have minimal awareness of how their own local district curricula (and the state and national models of curricula) could be viewed as supportive of the inclusion of play to varying degrees. This lack of articulation related to the body of play research could be unique to the four members of the study, but it does suggest a need for further investigation.

Researchers, of course, will continue to delve into a rich reservoir of study topics in relation to the role of play in the classroom (e.g., play and creative initiative, play and learning, play and social competence). The question of using play as a teaching strategy similar to Karissa's and Penny's positions of an interactive level of involvement in leading play events (in creative drama for Karissa's students and games for Penny's) is to be wrestled with by teachers of all levels in early childhood. In a historical overview of the theories of play, Saracho and Spodek (1998) concluded their remarks with the following comment:

Educational play may take many forms. The fundamental role of the teacher is to use the natural spontaneous play of children in a way that it has educational value while continuing to maintain its qualities as play. Educational play activities should be evaluated by the degree of children's involvement and its effectiveness in helping children reach educational goals. (p. 9)

The value of play within the classroom seems to be apparent when there is "educational value" to be found. Can the "fundamental role of the teacher" be better defined so that practitioners can feel themselves in alignment with administrative and public expectations of educators while "maintain[ing] its qualities as play"? Karissa's concern about how administrators perceived a teacher to be "using" play differed from the notion of providing for and responding to the natural, spontaneous play of children. It quickly shifted into children's understanding of a work context when it became teacher initiated and therefore fell outside the criteria of what most people consider play. Analyzing further what allows a teacher such as Janelle to risk play coexisting with the designated work of her first-grade environment would hopefully assist others in finding success and rich contexts for learning.

Having identified one teacher who allowed for child-initiated play constructs and exploration of child-generated themes, it would be valuable to discover other educators who incorporate play while working within the paradigms that lead to school success. Janelle's courage is a model for proponents of the role of play in childhood learning within educational contexts. Her belief that play enhances the

literacy and math/science skills of her students needs further research. Can a correlation be established between authentic (i.e., child-initiated) play within the context of the classroom and school success as Janelle would like to prove? Questions surrounding play and its contributions to reading and writing intrigue the educator and researcher, yet also lead to a warning regarding play interventions “since we may intrude too far where we need not in our effort to support literacy development in the early years” (Roskos & Neuman, 1998, p. 110). Substantiating through research that the multifaceted aspects of learning occur more cohesively and more meaningfully through multifaceted experiences in work and play can legitimize the incorporation of both beyond preschool and kindergarten. (Or, based on research, is it possible that we would discover that the clear distinction of work separated from play, as defined and modeled by Darcee, better serves the child? The parents voicing their concerns to her about the brevity of recess time revealed a concern for a lack of enough play during the course of the day.) Research into parent and administrative perceptions of the role of play, in addition to further investigations of teacher perceptions, would enhance our understanding. The creation of forums for dialogue on the topic would fulfill New’s (1992) call for more dialogue between kindergarten and the primary grades to afford more continuity in the educational experience of children and their parents.

Finally, it is apparent from the times in which these teachers function that there needs to be improved avenues of communication with the decision makers who impact what occurs in the early childhood classrooms of America. We seem to be living in a cultural gap that has the demands of American classrooms immersed in an abundance of curricular goals and objectives that are not necessarily in relationship with the young child’s propensity to play. Paley (1992, p. 20) noted, “Play, as we know, will soon become the game of life.” The need to conform to benchmarks for skill development in literacy, math, and the sciences must not lead to our overriding a child’s sense of a need to know and do. The teacher who views times of play as times of learning must defend the place of play in the classroom. He or she must be able to state in the face of the competitive culture, as Levin (1996) succinctly stated, “As an integral part of the knowledge construction process, play is a mechanism of vital importance across all areas and levels of development, not just in the early years” (p. 81). Allowing for play assists us in making certain that no childhood will be left behind as we fulfill our responsibility to be developmentally appropriate and developmentally significant.

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