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Conceptualising play-based learning from kindergarten teachers’ perspectives

Ellen Fesseha & Angela Pyle


Abstract

This study sought to gain insight into how Ontario teachers define play-based learning, and how their perspectives affect its implementation in kindergarten classrooms. Using survey data from kindergarten teachers from around the province of Ontario, two definitions of play were developed: one focused on social development through play, and the other on academic and social development in play. Results revealed inconsistencies in participants’ definitions and implementations of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. Several participants described the enactment of play that was entirely separate from learning, yet still indicated some belief in the ability to learn through play. While all participants described positive perspectives of play-based learning, more than half described the implementation of kindergarten programmes that did not fully integrate play-based learning as it is described in the Ontario curriculum. Participants were also asked to identify challenges they experienced in their implementation of play-based pedagogy. Participants in all enactment groups indicated experiencing challenges to their play implementation. These results support the need for a clear and consistent definition of play-based learning that will help determine how best to integrate play and the learning of academic skills.

Keywords: Play-based learning, Play, Kindergarten, Teacher perspectives
Introduction

Play and young children are often considered to be obvious pairs. Differences in this perspective begin to emerge when we consider the role of play in children’s learning. Within the research community, some advocate for the use of strictly child-directed free play, while others argue for the use of play as a tool in the overall development of kindergarten students (Bergen 2009; Ginsburg 2007). Even still, some only favour play in kindergarten as it pertains to the social and personal development of students (e.g. Eberle 2014), some describe the role of play in the development of academic skills (e.g. Riley and Jones 2010), while others question the benefits of play-based learning as a whole (e.g. Lillard et al. 2013). These discrepancies in perspectives about play complicate the implementation of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms.

Literature review

While play naturally occurs during childhood, its presence in early childhood development research was relatively unheard of until the twentieth century (Farné 2005). Among the early researchers who explored the use of play for early development is Piaget (1962), whose constructivist theory identified play as a means by which individuals can integrate new information into their already existing schemas, as well as Vygotsky (1967, 62) who regarded play as “the leading source of development in the preschool years.” Similarly, Froebel identified what he believed to be the core elements of play that were then embedded in his kindergarten model (Saracho and Spodek 1998). Researchers continue to look at play and its effect on early childhood development, including the use of play as a pedagogical practice for academic learning (e.g., Roskos and Christie 2011).

Challenges in defining play
While most would agree that play is beneficial in early education, how best to conceptualize play remains unclear. Many who attempt to define play suggest that it is not characterized by a single feature, but rather is multifaceted (Smith and Vollstedt 1985; Jenvey and Jenvey 2002). From a psychological perspective, Eberle (2014) has identified six basic elements of play, defining play as a voluntary process prompted by emotional experiences and pleasure. This understanding of play as a function of the disposition of the individual is one that is widely agreed upon (Pui-Wah and Stimpson 2004; Jenvey and Jenvey 2002). Others have considered the benefits of play from the neurological perspective, noting play’s sensory and neurotransmitter stimulation advantages, its connection to brain size and activity, and general cognitive development (e.g. Rushton, Juola-Rushton, and Larkin 2010; Pellis, Pellis, and Himmler 2014). As researchers attempt to create concrete definitions of play through differing theoretical lenses, those in education are left with contradictory definitions that can result in challenges to their understanding of the role of play in students’ development, and therefore, the implementation of play-based programmes.

Differences in the enactment of play-based learning

How and where play-based learning is implemented in classrooms is to some extent dependent upon how teachers identify their role within that play (Howard 2010). Understanding this, researchers have explored teachers’ uses of play, the role they assume within the play, and their understanding of how their involvement affects students’ learning (e.g. Sherwood, and Reifel 2013; Pyle, and Bigelow 2015). While many kindergarten teachers support the use of play-based learning, how this play is implemented lacks consistency and clarity. Pui-Wah and Stimpson (2004), in their exploration of teachers’ knowledge of play-based learning, found that while teachers stated that they incorporated play in their classrooms, their practices did not
match true play practices, instead play in their classrooms was fixed to specific circumstances and objects and was used separately from actual learning.

This disconnect between what teachers believe they are doing and what they are actually doing goes back in part to the problem described above, the disagreement concerning an appropriate definition of play (Baker 2014). In their investigation of teachers’ understanding of play-based pedagogy, Martlew, Stephen, and Ellis (2011) arrived at the same conclusions, a lack of cohesion in teachers’ interpretations of play-based learning translated into teachers’ misunderstandings of their role during play. A theorised explanation for this lack of cohesion is that those who use play-based approaches, for both research and educational purposes, often approach the topic from differing investigative perspectives, such as cognitive, emotional, or pedagogic, that affects the importance that is placed on specific aspects of that play (Howard 2010). To that end, researchers such as Leggett and Ford (2013) suggest that educators pay close attention to how, and from whom, they are receiving information so as to not develop confused interpretations of play-based pedagogy.

*Differences in the described roles of adults in children’s play*

An often-disputed topic in the discussion of play-based learning is the role of the teacher during play, specifically within the context of classroom play-based learning. Many have found that the most effective play-based learning occurs when the teacher, or adult, is there to facilitate and scaffold learning (Martlew, Stephen, and Ellis 2011; Weisberg et al. 2015). Supporting this education-oriented perspective, Bennett, Wood, and Rogers (1997) found that students made greater academic progress when teachers were involved in the play. Bodrova (2008) also found that higher quality learning occurs as a result of teacher scaffolding during play. Conversely, some researchers argue against teacher involvement, asserting that the underlying beliefs and
learning goals of teachers could unintentionally direct children’s play away from a context that is genuinely child-centered (Goouch 2008).

* Differences in the perceived benefits of play

There are those that argue that play sits separate from “work”, making the distinction between play and what they would call ‘non-play’. Jenvey and Jenvey (2002) define “nonplay” by identifying what play is not, such as work or organised activities. Pellgrini and Smith (1998) have alluded to a more socio-cultural perspective, noting the apparent purposelessness of play, thereby contradicting the perspective of play as a vehicle for learning. From a similar perspective, Wood (2004, 27), defines play-based pedagogy as “the ways in which early childhood professionals make provisions for play and playful approaches to learning and teaching, how they design play-based learning environments, and all the pedagogical decisions, techniques and strategies they use to support or enhance learning and teaching through play.”

Common to this pedagogy is the understanding of it as a developmentally appropriate practice that is child-centered, with teachers acting as guides through students’ learning experiences (Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie 2011; Gallant 2009). Somewhat to the contrary of this understanding of play-based learning, some researchers believe that while it is a developmentally appropriate practice that is beneficial, play should only be the work of children (Taylor et al. 2004). These contradictions surrounding the effective implementation of play in the classroom environment, complicate the enactment of play-based pedagogy.

From an education-oriented perspective, however, the use of play for learning purposes is popularly discussed in early childhood research, with many advocating for its inclusion in classrooms. Some advocate for play in the classroom simply for its ability to make tasks fun for students, translating to increased engagement (Bergen 2009), while others emphasize the benefits
of play for academic learning (e.g., Miller and Almon 2009). For instance, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the use of play-based learning in kindergarten leads to increased literacy development (Weisberg et al. 2015; Korat, Bahar, and Snapir 2002). Roskos and Christie’s (2001) education-oriented perspective suggests that play-based learning provides students with opportunities to use language and new vocabulary that support later reading and writing development. The benefits of play-based learning in enhancing mathematic and scientific thinking have also been explored. Bergen (2009) highlights how a play-based approach improves creativity and adaptability that then leads to the type of innovative thinking needed in professions such as engineering, architecture, and mathematics.

Lillard et al. (2013), however, have taken an opposing view that exists within a more psychological perspective. In their investigation of the influence of play on aspects of child development including language, reasoning, problem-solving, and Theory of Mind, Lillard et al. (2013) concluded that the current play literature leaves us wanting, citing issues such as a lack of replication of results, or bias on the part of the investigator. These conflicting findings suggest that the use of play may be beneficial when targeting a specific aspect of development, when used in a particular environment, or when not used for learning at all. Further compounding this challenge is a lack of consensus on the concept of play-based learning as pedagogy.

As Howard (2010) has put forward, the use of multiple theoretical perspectives can present potential issues for those attempting to gain insight into the use of play-based learning in the classroom context. From the socio-cultural perspective, researchers focus their arguments on the classroom environment and how students interact with that environment through the use of play-based pedagogy. This perspective removes accountability from the teacher and curriculum, as is the focus in the popularly discussed education perspective. From an education perspective,
play-based pedagogy is discussed within the context of academic content and for its ability to extend the learning of subjects taught in the classroom. A psychological perspective of play-based learning, however, removes the impact of any external influencers (e.g. the socio-cultural classroom environment, or education-oriented academic subjects), and explores the benefits/pitfalls of play-based learning within the context of human behaviour and mental processes. Considering the very different foundations that each of these theoretical perspectives are built off of, exploring the conceptualisation of play-based learning in the current early years climate is bound to result in confusion for those attempting to effectively implement the pedagogy.

Challenges of implementing play-based pedagogy

In the midst of these many opinions concerning the best practices and potential shortcomings of using play-based pedagogical approaches, teachers continue to face implementation challenges. Miller and Almon (2009) have identified many challenges described in play literature that lead to activities being categorised as play that are actually teacher-directed. To further gain insight into these barriers, Lynch (2015) analysed online discussion board messages of kindergarten teachers and found that teachers felt the pressures of academic expectations from a variety of sources, including other teachers, administration, and parents. These pressures resulted in limitations in the integration of play opportunities in their classrooms. Even when teachers were able to overcome the many challenges and implement more child-centered practices into their pedagogy, they continued to express feeling pressure from their colleagues in upper grades (Parker, and Neuharth-Pritchett 2006). With pressures being placed on educators from a range of sources, it seems only likely that the result is a lack of consistency in when, how, and to what extent play-based learning is being used in kindergarten classrooms.
Full-day kindergarten in Ontario

Despite the inconsistencies in definitions and proposed enactments of play-based learning, in 2010 the government in the province of Ontario began the transition to full-day kindergarten, following the lead of other Canadian provinces such as Nova Scotia, British Columbia, and New Brunswick. Accompanying this shift into a full-day framework, the Ministry of Education released a new kindergarten curriculum document, *Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten Programme (Draft version)* (OME 2010). This new document differs from its predecessors in its emphasis on the use of play-based learning in the kindergarten classroom, while still maintaining the high academic expectations of its predecessors. The document identifies the use of play as a means for learning that taps into the “natural curiosity” and creative energy of the student, and is accompanied by the belief that play and academic development are not mutually exclusive. The document goes on to explore the various forms play takes in the classroom (e.g. constructive play), the use of play through an inquiry lens, as well as the real-life contexts of play-based learning. However, a review of the document reveals that it does not provide teachers with an operationalised definition of play-based learning that explicitly describes how it can support both social and academic development through play.

In the current educational climate, teachers are required to negotiate a balance between mandated academic learning and developmentally appropriate play-based pedagogical practices. At present, research and policy documents are lacking an explicit and consistent definition of play-based learning. Accompanying this omission is a lack of consistent research findings that describe how play can be used to develop academic skills (Lillard et al. 2013). Despite this omission, current policy documents mandate this pedagogical approach, leaving teachers to determine how best to translate this mandate into practice. This study, while contributing to
existing area of early years research, provides insight into this research from a uniquely Ontario context. Further, demonstrated here is the lack of a consensus definition of play-based learning and the dearth of empirical evidence concerning the implementation of this pedagogical approach that has translated into inconsistent teacher perspectives concerning the purpose of play-based learning. The result being a misalignment between definitions and enactment in kindergarten classrooms.

Method

Survey

A survey was distributed to Ontario kindergarten teachers. Six of the 49 questions were related to demographics, and the remainder to play. With the exception of six open-ended questions that allowed participants to type out responses, the questions used a five-point Likert scale. Topics included the role of play in participants’ classrooms (e.g. “To what extent do you agree with the statement ‘students develop academic skills during play?’”), the role of teachers during play (e.g. “To what extent do you agree with the statement ‘teachers should supervise but not interfere with students’ play?’”), examples of play (e.g. “Please describe what play looks like in your classroom.”), and barriers experienced by teachers (e.g. “What are the challenges to integrating play in your classroom?”).

Participants

Participants received a link by email asking them to complete an anonymous online survey concerning play-based learning in the kindergarten classroom. In total, 101 elementary teachers from the province of Ontario participated. For the purposes of this research, only those who provided responses to the open-ended portion of the survey were included in the analysis, resulting in 69 participants. Participant responses indicated an average of 13 years teaching
experience, with an average of 7 years spent teaching kindergarten. Eighty-seven percent of participants indicated teaching in a public setting, with the remainder indicating independent affiliations.

Analysis

To explore teachers’ experiences with and perspectives of play, closed questions were tallied and converted to percentages to determine the consistency of responses. To create a definition of play, and explore participants’ enactment of play, participant responses to the open-ended portion of the survey were open-coded. These categories were then compared to support the presence of recurring themes. For instance, one well-represented emergent theme was play as supporting social development (e.g. stressing the way students learn skills such as making friends, turn-taking, and self-regulation). To explore how play was implemented, teacher descriptions of play in their classrooms were open-coded in the same manner described above. Finally, to develop a deeper understanding of some of the factors that may have influenced participants’ responses, questions pertaining to the challenges participants encountered when implementing play were also coded. These codes were then tallied to determine which of the challenges were most commonly identified.

Results

Results of the analysis showed that 91% of the teachers who participated in the current study agreed that play had always been a part of their classroom practice. However, only 19% of participants identified play-based learning as an existing part of their kindergarten programme. This finding highlights teachers’ understanding that play and play-based learning are distinct constructs that require distinct pedagogical approaches. To support the development of a programme that integrates play-based learning, 71% of the participants expressed having
received some form of play training. Despite this training, teachers described the challenges involved in determining how best to translate their prior use of play in the classroom, into the play-based learning pedagogy that is mandated by the current curriculum document, specifically the challenges of “trying to find time to teach all the required elements necessary from our curriculum and including play in every activity we teach” (Participant 38).

*Definitions of play-based learning*

In describing what they believe is learned through play, 41% of participants described only the development of social skills: ‘The kids are put in a position where they have to find solutions to their problems by themselves, through something they know best, playing. [They] develop language and communication skills, problem solving, logic, social skills’ (Participant 38). Descriptions of students learning of ‘the give and take of conversation and how to work through difficulty’ (Participant 56), or of the ‘skills needed for collaboration when working in cooperative groups’ (Participant 68) also informed this definition of play-based learning. In their conceptualizations of play for social development, participants consistently described the development of oral language and social problem solving in the context of play, with no mention of academic skills in their descriptions. From this perspective, a definition was developed that described play as a tool in the social and personal development of students, to the exclusion of academic development. While personal and social skill development is included in the Ontario kindergarten curriculum document, there is a more dominant focus on the learning of academic skills. As such, this definition omits a substantial number of curricular expectations from periods of play, leaving these expectations to be addressed during teacher-directed activities (OME 2010).
With a more inclusive philosophy than their socially focused counterparts, the other 59% of participants identified the concurrent development of academic and social skills in the context of play. Participant descriptions of academic learning included the explicit identification of academic subjects, the learning of academic skills (e.g. reading or writing), and/or descriptions of the cognitive processes related to the learning of new concepts (e.g. integration of new information). Reference to the development of social skills was discussed in parallel with the learning of academic skills: ‘Social skills, conversation skills, math, language, science etc. They are all enhanced through play. It is when the kids think learning is fun that they actually succeed’ (Participant 7). Based on this perspective, a second definition of play as a pedagogical practice, in which the learning of academic and social skills can co-occur in the context of play, was developed.

Participants who shared this perspective described play as a child-centered approach to learning that encompassed social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development in kindergarten, and maintained views that were in line with the curriculum document’s vision of play-based learning.

‘Students are motivated to practice and further their growing self-regulatory abilities while engaged in play experiences. Truly, when engaged in play experiences, oral language skills/learning is enhanced as well as numeracy skills, reading/writing skills, gross motor skills, social skills, inquiry-based skills. Essentially all aspects of development are enhanced for young children when engaged in play (Participant 46).’

These teachers further described the ability to differentiate according to student ability as an essential component of learning in a play-based programme.
‘All aspects. It is children driven and directed, therefore children are not being forced to do anything they are not ready for. This reduces stress for our youngest learners. Every child enters the classroom at a different level based on prior experiences and their understanding of the world around them. Therefore they are approaching learning at their level of readiness (Participant 6).’

Participant perspectives of the learning that occurs during play revealed some consistency among participants’ philosophies, however, contradictions continued to exist. Participants were almost evenly divided between two groups: those who expressed the belief that the purpose of play-based learning is for social development, and those who expressed the belief that both social and academic learning can occur through play-based learning. Because of the contradictory nature of these perspectives, a single definition of play would not be inclusive. The result was the development of two definitions:

1. Play-based learning supports students’ social development;
2. Play-based learning supports students’ social and academic development.

The enactment of play pedagogy

To explore the implementation of play-based learning based on participant philosophies, our survey asked for descriptions of play in participant classrooms. Though there were only two communicated definitions of play, three distinct implementation approaches were communicated in participant responses. The first form of implementation combined play and learning, with learning embracing a primarily social focus, and aligned with the definition of play for social development created above.

‘They are learning social skills- how to interact with peers, solve problems, compromise. They are exploring a variety of materials and building background knowledge. Their
language skills are developing as they interact with their peers. They are learning to persevere as they rebuild towers that have fallen in the block area (Participant 68).’

Participants also described how play provided them with opportunities to make observations of their students’ social development from which to assess achievement of the personal and social expectations of the programme.

‘I try to allow them a large chunk of time, particularly in the morning to engage in free play. This is where I notice whether or not they are interacting with others appropriately, whether they understand the social side of kindergarten (Participant 27).’

Alignment of the definition of play for social development was represented in 29% of responses, a reduction from the 41% who communicated this definition when asked explicitly. This approach to play echoed a large portion of the research community who subscribe to a perspective of play for primarily social development (e.g. Eberle 2014). However, this use of play-based learning omits the role of play in the development of academic skills, resulting in an incomplete conceptualisation of the pedagogy mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The second implementation also combined play and learning, but this implementation embraced both social and academic development in the context of play. These participants aligned with the second definition of play-based learning, wherein participants acknowledged the pedagogy holistically, discussing the purposeful set-up of environments, play that involved teacher extensions to include academics, or the co-construction of goals or activities.

‘Play is making connections to children’s explorations and invitations to reading, writing, mathematics, general studies, social connections, self management and supporting student well being. Play allows students to explore their ideas, interests and creativity. It
is their learning prescribed by them and the teacher facilitates their learning through this (Participant 70).’

This form of enactment was represented most frequently in responses, with 48% of participants describing the connection between play and the learning of both social and academic skills.

‘Effective play is when students are engaged in an activity that allows them to explore topics or concepts in a way that matches their interest and ability. Life skills and social skills are taught indirectly, as well as a variety of academic skills (Participant 69).’

While only two definitions emerged from participant responses about what children learn during play, a third type of implementation was described by participants, where play and learning do not co-occur. While earlier results revealed that all participants shared the perspective that some form of learning occurs during play, some participants strictly described play that was implemented separately from the learning of academics and/or social skills. These participants described learning as occurring in more formal settings, during teacher-directed learning (e.g. circle time or “work centres”) followed by time for free play.

‘Generally in my classroom the students are free to choose what activities they wish to do. While there is a designated time set aside for “free choice,” I also allow playtime during centre time. There are “work” centres that need to be completed but there is enough time for the students to complete their work and have time for play as well. The child has the choice of what to do when (Participant 67).’

In addition, teachers shared the perspective that periods of play presented the opportunity to withdraw small groups or individual students to learn essential academic skills that were not developed through play.
‘The children have a very brief meeting with me, then plan their activity centres. When they are called to work on small group activities/teacher-directed activities they are able to save their place at their centre and return to it with a little card (Participant 5).’

This would suggest the presence of a definition of play as a recreational activity, used for pure enjoyment, and having no practical use in the learning of concrete skills. None of the participating teachers expressed philosophies of play and learning that fit into this third definition, yet 23% of participants described a classroom structure that supported this approach.

‘My classroom has a circle on the floor where the students and myself sit every morning and discuss a subject. There’s also a calendar, weatherboard, counting straws for the number of days we’ve been in school so far. I have tables where the students sit when we do more structured activities. During our hour of free play (activity centres), the students are free to visit any of the centres that are in our classroom (Participant 38).’

Rather than play-based learning, these teachers implemented play in the more traditional sense, while the teacher directed the learning of concrete skills. This implementation revealed the presence of contradictions in teachers’ described philosophies of play-based learning and its enactment in their classrooms. There is a body of research that supports this approach (e.g. Woodhead and Ouvry 1999), however, it does not align with the description of play-based learning in the Ontario curriculum document. The finding of a third mode of enactment further reveals the complications that can arise from the lack of a nuanced definition of play-based learning from simple play, and how great an effect it can have on how student learning is approached.

**Challenges faced by teachers**
Participants’ descriptions of the implementation of play-based learning show inconsistencies in how Ontario teachers are conceptualising play, and therefore enacting the practice in their classrooms. To increase our understanding of these inconsistencies, participants were asked to identify the challenges that created barriers to their implementation. Twenty distinct challenges were identified, ranging from expectations to assess to noise level. While several of the challenges were unique to teachers who held particular perspectives, there was one notable exception: time was a challenge that was common among participants with varying conceptions of play-based learning.

Time was identified by 47% of participants as a moderate to extreme barrier in close-ended responses. Similarly, time was the most commonly mentioned challenge in participants’ open-ended responses. Many participants expressed having difficulty finding the time they thought was necessary to plan concrete learning opportunities in a play-based context. When identifying time as a significant challenge, several participants noted that the high number of academic curricular expectations made it difficult to find the time for open-ended play during the school day. In addition, the emphasis on assessment limited the possibilities for teacher engagement in that play.

‘When there is a strong emphasis on assessment, for board (reading assessments), the ministry in terms of report card, parents in terms of portfolios and students in terms of learning stories you feel like you are spending all of your time assessing and documenting and not enough time playing and being engaged with the students (Participant 12).’

**Play implemented separate from learning**
Participants who described enacting play separately from learning most commonly identified curriculum expectations as a challenge they faced when implementing play-based pedagogy. Fifty-three percent of these participants singled out academic curriculum expectations as moderate to extreme barriers to their implementation. Mirroring close-ended responses, academic curriculum was also commonly discussed in their open-ended responses. Given that these participants did not integrate play and curricular learning, a portion of the day was dedicated strictly to play, increasing the challenge of meeting all of the academic expectations. These participants found it difficult to fulfill all of the expectations in the available timeframe. Although the curriculum is promoted as entirely play-based in nature, these teachers echoed the difficult task many teachers are still faced with, determining how best to ‘thoughtfully prepare an engaging environment and set up playful learning opportunities with specific learning outcomes documented’ (Participant 79).

**Play implemented for social development**

Participants in the social learning through play group frequently noted parents and administration as the most significant challenges they faced. Parents were identified by 57% of participants as significant barriers in their play-based learning implementation. Supporting this finding, participants often mentioned that parents ‘misunderstand the rich learning and engagement that can occur’ (Participant 70). Others called attention to parents’ ability to accentuate academic expectations imposed on teachers, as sometimes ‘parents believe that children should play at home and learn at school… meaning paper tasks’ (Participant 17). Administration and colleagues were identified by 38% and 60% of participants, respectively, with many suggesting that administration maintains a focus on academic development, through a more ‘traditional model [where] play is not seen as a way to help children learn’ (Participant 56).
By taking more traditional viewpoints concerning required school learning outcomes, administration and colleagues left teachers conflicted about how to build their kindergarten programmes while still integrating the social learning they felt was essential.

**Play implemented for both social and academic development**

Those who fell into the holistic learning through play group often described challenges that pertained to the play environment more than the other two groups, mentioning challenges such as class size, materials, and space. A lack of materials/money for materials was identified by 25% of participants as a significant barrier to their play-based learning implementation, wherein ‘materials (paper, crayons, paints, etc.), special Kindergarten equipment and toys or collections of picture books for Kindergarten are hard to come by and a lack of any of those things creates challenges’ (Participant 65). Several participants also alluded to the lack of assistance (e.g. Educational Assistants) available to kindergarten teachers as contributing to the barriers presented by class size.

‘Due to the curriculum, not enough time is spent playing, as I'm expected to have "proof" that I'm assessing student learning. Also, I'm in a high needs neighbourhood with extreme behavioural challenges, so a high level of structure is needed to keep students safe. I generally have 3-5 violent children who require constant adult supervision, and 5-10 students with other special education needs. I think that in grade one play is still necessary, but I am constrained by safety issues and a lack of support. An EA, or any adult in the room would be helpful, and also give me time to work with the students who need more help, as well as the students who get overlooked due to their good behaviour (Participant 92).’
This group of teachers believed in and strove to enact the type of play-based programme that is mandated by the Ministry of Education. However, despite their overt alignment with the current kindergarten curriculum, these teachers continued to experience challenges, struggling to find the time and resources to support the implementation of this pedagogical approach. While some might say that this challenge is not overly surprising given the complexities of new programme implementation, these barriers are not strictly a result of new programme implementation. Rather, all of the participating teachers encountered challenges that are rooted in the lack of clarity in empirically validated definitions of play-based learning, policy design, and inconsistencies in descriptions of the appropriate integration of play and learning, including teacher role in play-based contexts and assessment practices that align with current mandated pedagogical practices.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine kindergarten teachers’ current definitions of play-based learning and how these definitions informed their classroom practice. While all participating teachers communicated the learning potential of play, defining this learning either as social or holistic, not all of the participants implemented an approach to play-based learning that fostered these learning possibilities. Instead, the data show a misalignment between some teachers’ stated definitions of play and the enacted play within their classrooms.

Two distinct definitions of play-based learning emerged from the results of this study: play for social development and play for the holistic development of social and academic skills. These findings align with the dichotomy present in current research concerning the role and value of play to children’s development (Eberle 2014; Yang 2013). Research indicates that the presence of a dichotomy in the understanding of a construct such as play-based learning is often
the result of the abstract challenges in defining a concept with varying forms, functions, and contexts (Wood 2008). The current lack of consistency in definitions of play-based learning is a major concern given that the implementation of play-based learning is dependent on the knowledge and understanding of the teacher (Howard 2010). As such, the development of a consistent definition of the construct of play-based learning through empirical research that can be translated into policy will provide teachers with a basis on which to construct their play-based pedagogy. This is essential to the successful implementation of the play-based Full-Day Kindergarten programme in Ontario.

As a result of this lack of a concrete definition of play-based learning, more than half of the kindergarten teachers who participated in this study did not implement play-based learning. Rather, they implemented play within the classroom with no intentional integration of academic skills. This approach does not align with the current Full Day Kindergarten curriculum document mandated by the Ontario government. Ontario is a unique setting to explore the disconnect between play-based pedagogy and the execution of learning expectations as it has recently shifted to a mandated play-based structure, while maintaining all but one academic expectation from its previously non-play-based versions (OME 2010). The results of this study support the claims made that in ineffectively combining play-based pedagogy with academics, the Ministry of Education in Ontario has failed to provide its educators with the support necessary to navigate the realm wherein play-based learning meets curriculum and policy. Currently, the percentage of teachers who in this study expressed perspectives that diverge from the discourse expected by the early learning framework and policy suggests further research should be conducted to explore what elements in Ontario’s early years policy and its conceptualization of play-based learning is interrupting teachers’ successful implementation of the pedagogy.
In further exploring where play and policy meet, Pyle and Deluca (in press) explored how teachers’ assessment practices different based on their conceptualizations of play-based pedagogy for student learning in Ontario. Their results revealed that how, when, and to what extent teachers were using assessment in their practice was heavily dependent on their beliefs about play-based learning. For example, teachers who held perspectives that were primarily geared towards social/personal development more infrequently enacted assessment to measure such development. Comparatively, those who expressed perspectives that included academic development through play-based pedagogy more frequently enacted assessment to measure their academic progress. These results further support the exploration of teacher perspectives for their effect on the enactment of policy-mandated expectations. As teachers navigate this meeting of two sometimes dichotomously thought of constructs, they are left having to mitigate the competition present between the developmentally appropriate play-based learning, and the heavy expectations placed on them by policy.

The shortcomings that currently exist in the implementation of play-based learning in Ontario kindergartens can to some extent also be explained by a deeper exploration of both the difference between play and play-based learning. Many educators and some researchers still have difficulty understanding, expressing, and implementing a pedagogy that is truly play-based. At present, there is limited discussion in the research and in policy concerning the differences between these two constructs. Play has long been researched and, while it has varying definitions, child-directedness and enjoyment are common elements of most definitions (Eberle 2014; Jenvey and Jenvey 2002). However, play-based learning requires a greater integration of adult support and more intentionality in the planning for play contexts (Vukelich 1994; Weisberg et al. 2015). For instance, while research indicates that free play provides the opportunity for
students to develop personal and social skills such as self-regulation and effective peer communication, research findings demonstrate that for academic learning to occur in the context of play teachers must be involved in the creation of a purposeful environment and in actively extending children’s play (Bodrova 2008; Martlew et al. 2011; Vukelich 1994). Only then does this play become play-based learning where academic skills development is the result.

Twenty-nine percent of participating teachers described the implementation of play with no intentional learning. Another group of teachers, while they did not integrate academic learning into their play, did intentionally support the learning of social skills within that play. The perspectives of these teachers did align with a subsection of the research community whose research demonstrates the benefits of play to children’s personal and social development (e.g. Bodrova 2008). However, while research may support this approach, many of these teachers communicated concerns about a lack of support from parents and administrators. They clearly communicated the opinion that these two groups do not assign value to the development of social skills as the sole focus of learning periods. We theorize that this is in part due to the current accountability structure within the education system. This structure uses academic skills measurement to determine student success, with minimal measuring or valuing of social skills development (Hatch and Grieshaber 2002). However, the curriculum document clearly communicates the importance of developing these skills through the inclusion of a set of curricular expectations that explicitly address personal and social development. In addition, this importance is empirically validated. For instance, prior research amply describes the role of self-regulation in later academic success and the essential role of play in the development of this important skill (Bodrova 2008; McLelland, Acock, and Morrison 2006). As such, future research
should strive to determine how best to communicate the role of these personal and social skills as precursors to academic learning to teachers, parents, and administrators.

In acknowledging the importance of personal and social development as essential components of the kindergarten programme, we cannot overlook the Ministry of Education’s mandate to implement a play-based pedagogical approach that supports the learning of academic curricular expectations. However, the results of this study indicate that fewer than half of the participants are implementing play-based academic learning in their classrooms. This challenge is not entirely surprising, and unique at the same time, given that the Full-Day Kindergarten Programme Document (OME 2010) maintains all but one of the academic expectations of its predecessors while mandating a novel play-based pedagogical approach to the learning of these expectations. This results in the need for teachers to negotiate a balance between the constructs of academic learning and play, while concrete descriptions continue to elude both teachers and researchers (Lillard et al. 2013). The challenges presented in the absence of a clear play pedagogy are common to curriculum design, and often leave it with less consistent outcomes (Wood 2004, 2008). Research and policy need to present clearer and more consistent conceptualisations of play-based learning and clearer evidence concerning the connection between academic learning and play. Further, clearer information concerning the integration of both academics and social development in play-based pedagogy is needed. This evidence and information could provide greater support for how to transition from the traditional perspective of play to the contemporary construct of play-based learning as pedagogy. This shift is crucial to the successful implementation of the current kindergarten programme, and will thereby aid in the better conceptualisation of play-based learning as it differs from play.
A minority number of the participating teachers are successful in their endeavour to integrate play-based learning to support social and academic learning as mandated by the Ministry. However, these teachers continue to communicate barriers to its implementation. These barriers are primarily environmental in nature, meaning that teachers do not feel the current classroom structure enables them to fully implement play-based learning to the best of their abilities. Their concerns primarily centre around the resources, both human and physical, that are needed to negotiate the necessary balance between academic learning and developmentally appropriate play-based pedagogy in a classroom environment that is, from their perspectives, over-populated by students and under-populated by resources.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Education in Ontario provides its teachers with information on why to use play and what it looks like, yet it is clear that this information is not sufficient and that a more concrete conceptualisation of play-based learning is needed to help teachers be successful in their programme implementation. While there are those teachers who are describing the type of play-based learning intended by the curriculum document, even these participants continue to struggle with developing play-based programmes that balance conflicting research findings and negotiate a balance between academic curricular expectations and play-based pedagogy. It is clear from these results that research that establishes a clear and consistent definition of play-based learning and that determines how best to integrate play and the learning of academic skills is needed. These results should then inform policy decisions concerning appropriate pedagogical approaches. At present, there is existing research is available related to play-based learning has left teachers in the position of negotiating its implementation while being held accountable for students’ academic learning. While this research provides some insight into the existing climate
of play-based research in the early years, the current study has provided a more unique snapshot of this climate as it pertains to an Ontario, and arguably Canadian, context. Still more needs to be done in exploring this area where play-based learning and curriculum meet, and more specifically, how policy and curriculum shape teachers’ perspectives of the pedagogy, and how curriculum can be altered to better support a play structure to learning in the early years. Researchers and policy makers alike must consider this reality and endeavour to remedy this situation.

Work Cited


Woodhead, Chris, and Marjorie Ouvry. “Is the formal approach better?” *Early Years Educator* 1.6 (1999): 10-1.