Children’s perspectives on the (dis)connections between play and learning in kindergarten

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Abstract

Practitioners in play-based learning contexts face the challenge of developing developmentally appropriate practices while meeting rigorous academic curriculum standards. To date, play and academic learning have been predominantly conceptualised from an adult perspective. Considering that children are key agents in classroom play contexts, it is important to understand their views on play and learning. The purpose of this study was to explore children’s perspectives on the connectedness between play and learning and understand whether their views are related to the play types observed in their classrooms. Photo elicitation interviews were conducted with 134 kindergarten students and 10 hours of observation were held in each of the 10 classrooms. Results indicate that children’s understanding of the connectedness between play and academic learning were related to teacher presence in play and the types of play environments available in their classrooms. Implications for practitioners and researchers alike are discussed.

Keywords: children’s perspectives, play, academic learning, kindergarten, developmentally appropriate practice, literacy


(Dis)connections between play and learning in kindergarten classrooms

In many jurisdictions worldwide, the past several years have seen an increased emphasis on academic standards in kindergarten (Russell, 2011). With heightened academic demands have come an increase in teacher-directed instruction (Ashiabi, 2007; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013) and a decrease in child-directed play in the classroom (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Miller & Almon, 2009; Stipek, 2006). Researchers and policymakers alike have identified and are tackling challenges that arise from a lack of play in kindergarten classrooms, and the need for a balance between academic learning and developmentally appropriate practices (e.g., National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

With numerous definitions permeating the literature, the academic community continues to struggle to identify an operationalisable definition of play (Pyle & Danniels, 2016; Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012). Historically, children’s play has been described as a process-driven, self-directed, child-focused, and freely chosen activity (Ashiabi, 2007; Glenn, Knight, Holt, & Spence, 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009; Sturgess, 2003). Play is often considered to be a child-led activity that is distinct from learning, and therefore less of a priority in the classroom (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Wood, 2010). However, many researchers and professionals argue that play and learning are interrelated concepts, and that play constitutes a key part of the learning process in the classroom (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). Indeed, some researchers argue that guided play, a form of play that falls between direct instruction and free play, is a better promoter of positive academic outcomes than direct instruction (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). Yet teacher-directed academic instruction remains prominent in kindergarten (Bassok et al., 2016; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk,
& Singer, 2009) despite knowledge that learning through play is an effective pedagogical approach (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, & Ingram, 2010).

Play-based learning has been mandated in numerous jurisdictions in an effort to integrate play and academic curricula (e.g., Abu Dhabi Education Council, 2010; Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2001; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Educators and researchers have since been grappling with the challenge of integrating play-based contexts and academic demands in kindergarten classrooms (Baker, 2014; Hegde & Cassidy, 2009; Hu, Fuentes, Wang, & Ye, 2013; Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004). Play-based learning seeks to combine the primary forms of play that are addressed in the extant literature: children’s pretend play (Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012) and adult-guided play (Weisberg et al., 2013). While these two approaches are discussed at length in the literature, their integration presents challenges; many researchers and educators alike continue to express reluctance to define an adult role in children’s play, with some describing this as work disguised as play (Weisberg et al., 2013) and others questioning the usefulness of a play-based approach to academic learning (Lillard et al., 2013). These opposing conceptions of play have resulted in a continuing struggle to determine how to integrate play into kindergarten classrooms in the face of rigorous academic standards (Bassok et al., 2016). One area of academic development that has been of particular interest to researchers is children’s literacy development in the context of play-based programming (Christie & Roskos, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2011, 2013).

**Play and literacy**

Researchers have extensively investigated the most effective means to develop young children’s literacy capacities (Kalia & Reese, 2009; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; O’Neill, Pearce, & Pick, 2004; Pelletier, 2011; Pelletier & Astington, 2004). It is
widely acknowledged that the development of children’s literacy skills requires explicit instruction in alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, writing, and oral language ability (Adams, 1990; Beck & McKeown, 2007; Pelletier, 2011). While the literature tends to focus on explicit instruction as the primary means of teaching literacy, numerous studies have also indicated that the play process is foundational to children’s literacy development (Pellegrini, 1985; Roskos & Christie, 2013; Roskos, Christie, Widman, & Holding, 2010; Williamson & Silvern, 1991). For instance, the use of symbolic representation during pretend play and play in classroom centres provides ample opportunities for children’s development of oral and literacy skills (Christie & Roskos, 2013; Neuman & Roskos, 1997). Laakso, Poikkeus, Eklund, and Lyytinen (1999) observed that children’s symbolic play competence was predictive of later verbal comprehension and expressive language abilities. Roskos and Christie (2007) argue that teachers should make direct connections between academic curricular content and literacy-enriched play centers to increase children’s opportunities to practice their literacy skills during play.

Collaboration with adults and peers plays an important role in children’s literacy development during play (Christie & Roskos, 2013; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Vygotsky, 1976). During play, children’s interactions with their caregivers can facilitate early lexical development, particularly when caregivers follow rather than direct children’s focus of attention (Dunham, Dunham, & Curwin, 1993). In the classroom setting, teacher scaffolding during play increases the amount of literacy activity in which children engage (e.g., Morrow, 1990; Morrow & Rand, 1991). In her seminal study, Morrow (1990) found that children’s engagement in voluntary literacy behaviours during play increased when teachers provided more literacy materials in their classroom centres (e.g., list of doctor’s hours, appointment cards) and offered
children suggestions as to how they can play with these materials at the beginning of play periods (e.g., booking appointments). Children must also collaborate with peers to create frameworks for their play scenarios, while using their language skills to regulate each other’s roles and communicate tasks. In print-enriched play environments, Neuman and Roskos (1991) observed that young children engage in various kinds of literacy conversations with each other, such as negotiating the meanings of literacy-related routines (e.g., ‘buying’ versus ‘borrowing’ books at the library) and coaching each other to overcome literacy-related obstacles during play (e.g., spelling). Such findings suggest that children’s collaboration in literacy-infused play promotes their learning. As such, it is important that researchers consider both teacher-initiated and child-centered dimensions that are involved in play-based learning.

**Continuum of play-based learning**

While some research frames play-based learning as a strictly child-centered pedagogical practice (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, Moore, & Boyd, 2014), further research is emerging that emphasises play-based learning as a continuum that integrates child-centered play and play in teacher-initiated contexts (Pyle & Danniels, 2016). Researchers have suggested that the common dichotomised definition of play as either play or not play should be revised to a continuous definition of observationally playful behaviours (Pyle & Danniels, 2016; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983). Free play activities, the most child-directed end of this continuum, can be defined as activities that are child-directed, unprescribed, and variable (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Newcombe, & Gollinkof, 2013; Holt, Lee, Millar, & Spence, 2015; Weisberg et al., 2013). At the opposite end of the continuum are teacher-involved and teacher-initiated playful games and activities, during which the teacher outlines the process and objective of the activity, and the children follow the rules of the game (Pyle & Danniels, 2016). In the
middle of the continuum are collaborative forms of play, where teachers and students work together to create play contexts that integrate the learning of academic skills (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). While children are key agents in all play contexts across the continuum, researchers are only beginning to investigate children’s perspectives of play and academic learning during play-based interactions (Nicholson, Shimpi, Kurnik, Carducci, & Jevgjovikj, 2014; Theobald et al., 2015).

**Children’s perspectives on play and learning**

Play has predominantly been conceptualised from an adult perspective (Gaffiero, 2008; Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers, 2010) and little is known about children’s thoughts of their play experiences. A lack of children’s perspectives on play has become an area of increasing concern for both researchers and practitioners (Howard, 2002; Nicholson, Kurnik, Jevgjovikj, & Ufoegbune, 2015; Scott, 2000). In a recent study, Theobald et al. (2015) sought three- and four-year-old children’s perspectives on play and learning in their classrooms, and found that children and adults varied greatly in their perceptions of play. Children were more likely to interpret an activity as play if they had ownership and choice in the activity, and associated learning with teacher presence and involvement. These findings align with previous studies in which children described self-initiated activities as play (e.g., Howard, Jenvey, & Hill, 2006) and adults as restricting play (e.g., Glenn et al., 2013; Howard, 2002), illustrating that control and adult role are defining characteristics of children’s perspectives on play and learning.

The physical environment has been identified as an equally important element in children’s views on play and learning activities (Howard, 2002; Howard et al., 2006). Children more frequently identify an activity as work if it takes place at a table compared to on the floor (Howard, 2002). Chapparo and Hooper (2002) found that children tended to categorise the same activity (i.e., singing) differently based on
whether it took place in the classroom (work) or on the playground (play). While these findings provide valuable insight into children’s perspectives of play and work as individual constructs, further research is required to understand how children conceptualise the relationship between play and learning in their kindergarten classrooms, where curricula mandate that play and learning happen concurrently. It may also be important to distinguish between ‘working’ and ‘learning’ in conducting this research; it is possible that children view work and play as separate constructs, but may perceive that learning can happen during play.

**Method**

This research took place in Ontario in the final year of a phased-in implementation of the new Full-Day Kindergarten Program (FDK). This program contains high academic standards with a concurrent mandate to deliver the program through a play-based pedagogical approach (e.g., OME, 2010). As this program requires a balance of play-based exploration and explicit instruction (OME, 2010), kindergarten teachers face the challenge of deciding how, and to what extent, they should incorporate play in the classroom (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015) making this the ideal location to study the relationship between play and learning.

**Data collection**

Ten kindergarten classes were selected based on geographical location and teachers’ willingness to participate. The researchers conducted approximately 10 hours of observation in each classroom. These observations focused on periods of direct literacy instruction, including whole-group and small-group contexts, and periods of play. Observations were recorded both through field notes and video recording. In addition, this research acknowledges that children as young as three years of age are capable of providing accurate self-conceptions (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Measelle et al., 1998) and
meaningful accounts of their personal experiences (Greene & Hogan, 2005), and that learning about children’s perspectives from children themselves affords researchers and practitioners the opportunity to understand their role in shaping educational experiences (Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellet, & Robinson, 2004; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). As such, students from whom parental consent and student assent (Pyle & Danniels, 2015) were received were invited to participate, resulting in a total of 134 Junior and Senior kindergarteners (from three to six years of age). Photo elicitation interviews were conducted with groups of three to five students (Pyle, 2013). During these interviews, students were shown researcher-produced photographs of whole-group instruction, small-group instruction, and periods of play. Students were asked to select photographs that they felt showed important learning happening in their classroom and explain their reasoning. Students were also asked a set of semi-structured interview questions (e.g., Are learning and playing the same or different? What do you learn when you play?).

**Data analysis**

Children’s interviews were transcribed verbatim, and open coding was conducted for their views on play and learning during classroom activities. Patton’s (2002) method of constant comparison was used to generate codes, categories, and themes for each of the ten focal classrooms, primarily regarding children’s views on the relationship between play and learning. Coding each classroom’s child interview groups was a two-step process. First, each group was coded individually to identify children’s views on the relationship between play and learning; then, the majority theme was assigned to the group. The majority theme was consistent for all groups within each classroom, and was thus assigned to the respective classroom. Two primary categories emerged: classrooms in which children viewed play and learning as connected constructs, and classrooms in which children viewed them as distinct constructs. Subsequent to the within-class
analysis, cross-class analysis was conducted to identify similarities and differences in the perspectives of students across the ten classrooms.

Video observations of children’s periods of play in each classroom were coded for variation in types of play (e.g., free play, collaborative play) and for literacy behaviours observed during play (e.g., reading, writing). For example, a video depicting students building with Lego blocks was coded as free play, and a video of students playing Word Bingo was coded as a form of play on the continuum (i.e., learning through games). Videos were simultaneously coded for themes relating to the play environment and teacher absence and presence during play. Finally, for each classroom, interview and observational data were compared to identify whether there was a match between children’s perspectives and researcher observations.

Results

Photo elicitation interviews and classroom observations revealed that children have dynamic understandings of play and academic learning that are related to their classroom play contexts. Play environments in five classrooms were observed to be rich in play types and resources; children in these classrooms viewed play and academic learning as connected constructs that can occur simultaneously. Free play was the most prominent play type observed in the other five classrooms, with less variety in resources; these children viewed play and academic learning as distinct constructs that occur at different times. Students’ perspectives of learning literacy behaviours during play were consistent with their broader conceptualisations of play and academic learning. Their understanding of the connectedness, or the lack thereof, between the two concepts were also related to teacher presence and absence in classroom play activities. Overall, children’s understandings of play and academic learning resemble and appear to be shaped by their play experiences inside the classroom.
**Play environment**

In examining the observed play environments in each of the ten classrooms, two categories emerged: classrooms that integrated a variety of play types in the classroom (Pyle & Danniels, 2016), and classrooms that almost exclusively engaged in free play.

**Play continuum**

Five classrooms were observed to have variation in the types of play activities. Collaborative play was prominent in these classrooms. In Class 4, for example, children’s interest in animals inspired the creation of a pet shop turned veterinary clinic, where there was medical equipment (e.g., play needles, masks), a poster for hours of operation, and an appointment book among a variety of other tools that are commonly found in clinics. In Class 2, the classroom teacher supported the students in creating a haunted house, where children developed their literacy and math skills by writing signs and engaging in the buying and selling of entrance tickets. Playful learning was also observed in these five classrooms. In Class 10, to support the development of student math skills, the teacher prepared order forms for the flower shop centre; students then filled out their forms and gave them to the shopkeeper to prepare their orders. Learning through games was also a common occurrence in these classrooms. In Class 3, children played ‘Words with Friends’, where players took turns building words on a game board using letter tiles. Similarly, children in Class 7 were observed playing Word Bingo, where they had to match a letter card to a picture (e.g., L l – lion).

**Free play**

While free play was observed in all ten classrooms, it was the most prominent type of play observed in five of the classrooms, where other types of play were not observed. The most common type of free play activity in these classrooms was building (e.g., Lego, blocks) and the second most prominent type involved playing with self-chosen
toy bins on the carpet (e.g., animal figurines, dinosaurs, miniature cars). Children also engaged in sensory play activities (e.g., play dough, sand tables). Other forms of free play included painting at the art centre and playing at the house centre. The nature of free play episodes is that they are entirely child-directed and voluntary, as was observed in these classrooms. As such, teachers in these classrooms were not involved in providing children resources intended to promote the learning of targeted academic skills during their play, or in guiding or extending play episodes. While children from all ten classrooms experienced different forms of play activities, they shared similar views on the learning of personal-social skills during play.

**Learning personal-social skills during play**

Children in all ten classrooms described learning personal-social skills during play, such as sharing, collaboration, and adherence to play rules. Children commonly described learning to ‘[share] your toys’ (Irene, Class 1) during play activities, and observational data mirrored these accounts. In Class 8, a student was observed playing with a race track when his classmate said: ‘I was first, James. So give it to me.’ When James did not return the toy, the student eventually walked away from the situation. Such play conflicts present opportunities for students to develop their social play skills, such as through teacher-facilitated discussions or attempting different strategies to resolve conflict. In Class 4, students were observed orally negotiating their play spaces and their learning materials. A student unintentionally sat in his peer’s seat during play, who remarked, ‘I am sitting there.’ The student immediately moved to the seat beside his peer. Students in this classroom were also observed negotiating toy usage as they played with various materials on the carpet.

Children also identified collaboration as a skill that they learn during play. Wallace explained: ‘You get along and be nice and help people that need help when
they’re trying to build something. And you help them be nice to each other and be friends’ (Class 9). Many children similarly highlighted the importance of positive social relationships for functioning well within a classroom milieu. Observational data revealed numerous instances of learning and practicing collaboration. In Class 3, students were observed playing with Lego on the carpet when a boy entered the play scenario, but his classmate rejected him. The boy immediately recounted the incident to his teacher, who then discussed the situation with both students. The boy received an apology and was accepted into the play. Play conflicts provided opportunities for incidental learning in the classroom and, as illustrated, appear to have contributed to children’s perspectives of play and learning personal-social skills. While some students were still developing their collaborative skills, others were observed to have already acquired the skill. In Class 6, a pair of students were observed playing at the sand table when another pair joined them. A student from the initial pair pointed to her big tower and asked her new play partners: ‘Are you helping me?’ As Wallace mentioned, play provides the opportunity to collaborate and to develop positive peer relationships.

Lastly, children described learning about the adherence to play rules. Children often recounted learning rules regarding the handling of play materials, such as Julian who noted that ‘you learn how to play with the toys so they don’t break’ (Class 9). Children also recognised actions that should be taken if play items do happen to break: ‘If [toys] are broken, we throw it in the garbage’ (Darrell, Class 8). Julian and Darrell’s narratives reveal their understandings of protocols regarding play materials, which were also apparent in classroom observations. In Class 7, a student was observed showing one of the researchers her classroom’s ‘What do you wonder’ centre, where she was exploring different materials with a magnifying glass. In doing so, she mentioned having to be careful with the materials while playing. Children also referred to play
principles regarding peer safety and classroom transitions. Kate explained, ‘you have to keep your friends safe and tidy up’ during play (Class 1). In Class 4, the classroom teacher was observed helping students tidy up play materials. She focused on each piece of equipment at the centre and taught the students to read the bin labels and to place each item in the correct one. Children’s identification of the adherence to play rules as a form of learning was consistent with observations of their classroom play experiences. While children in all of the classrooms described learning personal-social skills during play, there were variations in children’s understandings of the role of academic learning in play.

**Children’s perspectives of play and academic learning**

In examining children’s perspectives on play and learning, two categories emerged: five classrooms in which children viewed play and learning as connected constructs, and five classrooms in which children viewed them as distinct constructs.

**Connected constructs**

Children in five classrooms described a connection between play and academic learning, namely that they can occur at the same time and through the same activities. When talking about their classroom centres, Adam explained: ‘That’s why it’s called learning centres. You play and learn’ (Class 3). His perspective reflected the notion that play and academic learning can happen concurrently. In these classrooms, centres were designed and enriched to engage children in academic learning during their play. For instance, in Adam’s classroom, children at the building centre completed building permits about their Lego structures. In Class 2, children often played at the haunted house centre; during the photo elicitation interviews, Braxton described a photo of the centre: ‘This picture is learning because it shows you how to make a haunted house’ (Class 2). Children described learning at the haunted house as writing and reading signs
(e.g., hours of operation) and calculating payment for entrance tickets, and described play as pretending to be monsters and zombies. Similarly, children in Class 10 identified their flower shop centre as an important play context where they could learn academic skills. In this context, children were observed buying and selling flowers, ordering flowers for special occasions, and making bouquets. Children’s understandings of the connectedness between play and learning aligned with their experiences in their classrooms, where they were engaged in centres that were rich in play and academic resources.

*Play and literacy.* Children in these five classrooms also recognised literacy behaviours as being embedded in their play. When Jesse was asked if she writes during her play, she responded: ‘Sometimes to make stories’ (Class 7). Her perspective reflected an understanding that literacy behaviours and play can occur together. Children also noted that they can write about their play activities. Teresa explained, ‘When we build a structure, we can write about the structure’ (Class 7). Teresa perceived writing about her play activities as a method of integrating literacy behaviours in her play. Children in her classroom were also observed playing Bingo word games, and flipping through books while engaging in writing and painting activities.

Ezra echoed the importance of centres for learning during play, explaining that she plays while she reads ‘after lunch sometimes and when we have centres’ (Class 10). Children’s reflections about specific centres in their classrooms further supported Ezra’s perspective. In describing their pet shop, Violet explained: ‘When we go to pet shop, I look at a book to tell me what to do so, how to – how to make the pets feel better’ (Class 4). Indeed, children were observed reading animal books at the pet shop turned veterinary clinic to understand the animal’s illness and provide appropriate care. These children described literacy behaviours as occurring in numerous ways in their
classroom, which closely aligned with the availability of literacy resources in various centres (e.g., building centre, veterinary clinic).

**Distinct constructs**

Children in the other five classrooms described play and academic learning as distinct constructs, distinguishing the two based on classroom materials, actors, and settings. Kate described play as meaning ‘you have stuff and you’re playing with toys’ (Class 1). Indeed, observational data revealed that, during play periods, students from these classrooms were most often engaged in activities such as drawing at the art centre, and playing with dinosaurs and cars. Children’s perspectives aligned with their classroom experiences, where free play was the most frequent and apparent type of play. Students associated academic learning with teacher-directed lessons. Caroline explained that during learning ‘the teacher’s teaching you some sort of stuff’ (Class 9). In her classroom, teacher instruction was most often observed as whole-group instruction, and the teacher was absent during children’s play. Children described play and academic learning as happening in different places in the classroom. Zachary explained that he and his classmates ‘really love the drama centre, we will play with the drama centre’ (Class 8). Josh pointed at a picture and said it shows learning because ‘there’s something written on the board’ (Class 6). These children’s perspectives of play and academic learning mirrored their classroom contexts, where play and academic learning were presented (whether intentionally or not) as occurring separately.

**Play and literacy.** Children further expressed their distinct understandings of play and academic learning when asked about the presence or absence of literacy behaviours in their play; children in these five classrooms said that they did not engage in literacy behaviours during play. Wallace explained that they ‘read when it’s tidy up time’ (Class 9). He associated reading with the ending of play, thereby conceptualising play and
academic learning as distinct constructs occurring at independent times. Similarly, when Landon was asked if he engaged in writing during play, he responded: ‘No, you write when you work’ (Class 9). Wallace and Landon’s notions were also observed in Class 1; the classroom teacher approached a student to pull him aside from his play to read a book, but the student refused. Pulling students for individual or small-group instruction while other students engaged in play might reflect to children that play and academic learning happen independent of each other. On some occasions, children did describe making the free choice to engage in literacy behaviours, but still considered literacy learning to be an activity separate from play:

Lexi: We read, when we want to read we just read.
Researcher: Yeah? Is it when you’re playing or is it something different?
Lexi: Something different. (Class 6)

Lexi’s separation of play and reading indicates that children did not necessarily perceive ‘free choice’ to characterise an activity as either play or literacy learning. Instead, children’s understandings of whether they can, or do, engage in literacy behaviours during play may have been related to other factors such as the availability of reading and writing resources within their various classroom centres.

*Classroom at a crossroad.* One classroom emerged as an exception with respect to the match between children’s perspectives and classroom observations. In Class 5, children identified play and academic learning as distinct constructs, yet researchers observed the classroom to house a literacy-rich play environment. Students were observed placing picture cards in their appropriate alphabet slots on the alphabet wall. The classroom had an airport centre which included literacy elements such as name and luggage tags, and labels throughout the various components of the centre, such as its cockpit, passenger seats, and airport security area. Yet, students in the classroom
expressed that the two constructs were distinct: ‘Playing you play with stuff, and learning you learn stuff like, how to tie a knot or something’ (Harry, Class 5). Addison noted that writing occurred ‘when the teacher calls you,’ referring to being withdrawn during periods of play to work one-on-one with her teacher. Her quotation demonstrated her belief that it was during these teacher-directed periods that literacy learning occurred.

In further observational analysis of the airport centre, several themes emerged that could be related to children’s understanding of play and learning as distinct. First, the centre was not openly accessible to children at all times; children could not use the airport as they pleased, even during play times. The classroom teacher was observed telling a student that he could play at any centre except the airport centre because it was closed for the rest of the day. Second, the freedom to enhance the centre did not appear to be available to the students. The pilot name tags were created and written by the teacher, and students noted to the researcher that the airplane was primarily built by others: ‘Brody and someone else, and Mark’s mom made the airplane’ (Calvin, Class 5). Children did not mention any involvement in the setup of the centre. Finally, the teacher was absent during children’s play at the centre; as described by children earlier, teacher presence may have played an important role in enhancing and enriching children’s play experiences with academic learning and literacy behaviours.

**Teacher presence in play**

In classrooms where children described play and academic learning as connected constructs, teachers were often active participants in children’s play scenarios. The flower shop in Class 10 was initiated by a teacher’s positive response to student interest. When asked who came up with the idea to have a flower shop centre, Diane explained: ‘I said to Ms. Bell, we could have a flower shop party. And then Ms. Bell said it was a great idea’ (Class 10). The teacher participated at the flower shop by asking students
questions (e.g., price of the flowers) and scaffolding their play. Interestingly, Arnold explained that the flower shop centre is both play and learning ‘because all the children in our class are there, Ms. Taylor’s talking, and Ms. Lacy is helping us’ (Class 10). He identified child and teacher collaboration as a key contributor to the connectedness of play and learning. In Class 2, students were observed taking apart a keyboard with their teacher during a play session. In describing a photo taken at this centre, Fatimah stated: ‘They’re absolutely taking apart [the keyboard]. And so is Ms. McEwen, because Ms. McEwen is trying to take it apart with Rami and Jutwinder’ (Class 2). Fatimah included her teacher as a participant in the play session alongside her peers. Madeleine echoed her classmate, and added: ‘Rami and Jutwinder and the teacher are learning how to take apart the computer’ (Class 2). By including the teacher in their accounts of classroom play and learning experiences, children were conveying that teacher presence did not detract from the playfulness of an activity; instead, children and teachers were engaged in the play and learning processes together as collaborators.

In classrooms where children described play and learning as distinct constructs, teachers were absent from the play. Teacher instruction took the form of either whole-group instruction, or small-group instruction where children were being withdrawn from play. When asked how he learned, Jordan responded: ‘You have to learn from the teacher’ (Class 1); children provided similar responses across the other classrooms where play and learning were viewed as distinct. When their classroom environments reflected a distinction between play and learning, it appears that children viewed teacher presence as detracting from play. In Class 5, Calvin explained that learning does not occur during play because ‘the teacher won’t hear us … because we talk when we’re playing’ (Class 5). The lack of teacher involvement in play in Calvin’s classroom was reflected in his understanding that play and learning were distinct. Thus, in addition to
providing a rich variety of play resources in the classroom, the teacher’s role in the play shaped children’s views on the connectedness between play and academic learning.

**Discussion**

Children’s perspectives of play differed in the ten classrooms, reflecting their classrooms experiences. In the classrooms where opportunities to engage in varied types of play were provided, the students expressed the perspective that play and learning were connected. In the classrooms where free play was the dominant form of play, the students expressed the perspective that play and learning were distinct construct. The data demonstrate that the role of play that was communicated to students, whether directly or through pedagogical actions, informed their perspectives about the purpose and value of play. In this study, the classroom environment implicitly communicated to students whether or not play was a context for learning. That is, when varied types of play were integrated in the classroom, providing opportunities for child-directed free play, alongside opportunities for more teacher guided play contexts, the children communicated a more holistic definition of play that integrated both pleasurable, open-ended opportunities (Ashiabi, 2007; Sturgess, 2003), and opportunities to learn necessary academic skills in a playful context. While many researchers continue to debate how, or whether, to integrate play and academic learning (e.g., Lillard et al., 2013, Lynch, 2015), the children in this study communicated the possibilities for their integration. Having knowledge of children’s views on the types of activities that constitute both play and academic learning offers practitioners the opportunity to provide students with a classroom environment that children themselves view as being developmentally appropriate while also fulfilling academic demands (Howard, 2002). Such integrations also demonstrate to children the value of play.
While the play environment was found to be an important component of children’s understanding of the connectedness between play and academic learning, teacher presence also emerged as a determining factor. In previous research, teacher interaction during play has been found to increase the duration and complexity of children’s play, as well as the linguistic and cognitive skills involved (McAfee, Leong, & Bodrova, 2013). In the current study, children who believed that learning could happen during play described both many instances of teacher involvement in play and student-teacher collaboration in the design and use of play-based learning centres. Whereas previous studies found that children associated play with teacher absence (e.g., Glenn et al., 2013), the findings of this study suggest that in certain classroom contexts, children do view teacher presence as part of their play. Considering the benefits of teacher participation and children’s willingness to engage with their teachers during playful activities, it is important to establish collaborative classroom play environments in which teachers and students alike are active participants.

Children who believed that learning did not happen during play described their teachers in more traditional understandings of teacher roles (e.g., teacher-directed instruction) and did not discuss their teachers when describing their play activities. As Howard (2002) notes, teacher scaffolding during play is made difficult when children associate play with the absence of adult participation. Furthermore, if children’s perspectives of their teachers’ roles are influenced by their classroom experiences, teacher participation in varied play types may lead to children’s acceptance and understanding of teacher involvement in play. As free play was the most prominent type of play observed in these classrooms, children did not have the opportunity to assess their teachers’ roles in play, and viewed their role primarily in direct instruction.
As many jurisdictions strive to reintroduce or maintain the presence of play in kindergarten classrooms, mandated curricula seek to integrate high academic standards with play-based pedagogical approaches. The result is more time spent playing in kindergarten classrooms, and less time spent in teacher-directed instruction. The resulting dilemma is determining how to ensure that children develop the necessary academic skills, with less direct instruction. Play-based learning contexts provide an approach that is supported by many as developmentally appropriate to kindergarten education (e.g., Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). However, within this potentially valuable pedagogical context, it is necessary to ensure that play environments support the development of the essential academic skills that are the foundation for later learning and are mandated by curricula (McNamara, Scissons, & Dahleu, 2005; Steele, 2004). Negotiating this balance is complex, however, our findings demonstrate that the integration of varied types of play that provided opportunities for teachers to join and extend the play provided contexts for the integration of play and academic learning.

References


role of the teacher in a play-based pedagogy and the fear of hijacking play.


