Barriers to Implementation of Play in Early Childhood Classrooms

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Extant research shows that play is beneficial for young children; yet, play continues to be increasingly limited in early childhood classrooms (Lynch, 2015). According to Baker (2015), teachers' perspectives and personal beliefs about play have a large impact on their pedagogical practices. However, factors such as the conflicting beliefs of others, the focus on academics in curriculum and policy, and the lack of professional development can act as barriers to teachers' inclusion of play in their early years' classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to explore these barriers and to suggest recommendations based on existing research to alleviate these issues.

Conflicting Beliefs

Despite the fact that many teachers hold positive beliefs about play, others may not support the inclusion of play in early years' classrooms. While some parents may understand the value of play, many view it as mutually exclusive from learning (Kane, 2016). Their rejection of play as pedagogy may reflect their lack of experience with more progressive teaching methods (Dockett, 2011; Baker, 2015).

Resistance to incorporating play in the classroom extends beyond parents. In her study with 4 first-grade teachers in the United States, Ranz-Smith (2007) found that teachers in the same grade level support the use of play in the classroom; however, one participant stated that colleagues in the intermediate grades often questioned their play practices. Similarly, Lynch's (2015) ethnographic study of 78 kindergarten teachers revealed that early childhood teachers often felt judged, looked down upon, and were labeled as lazy by colleagues and administrators who lacked understanding of developmentally appropriate activities for young children. Indeed, teachers label themselves as "lucky" if they work in a school environment that supports play (Lynch, 2015), thus suggesting that rejection of play-based pedagogy is the pervasive norm.

Pyle and Bigelow (2014) suggest that, in addition to planning play activities to support learning through play, teachers must also determine their own role in children's play. This presents challenges to teachers when collaborating with others, as differences in their conceptualizations of play pedagogy causes tensions among colleagues (Baker, 2015; Ranz-Smith, 2007).

Curriculum and Policy

The criticisms of play as pedagogy may be linked to the "broader culture of schoolification" (Kane, 2016). The strong

curricular emphasis on academics acts as a major barrier for teachers, as they feel pressured to focus on activities that boost academic achievement. In their attempt to cover curricular standards, teachers in the United States often sacrifice play for "pencil and paper" learning and mandated activities (Lynch, 2015; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) found that kindergarten teachers in the U.S. felt constrained by academic expectations to prepare their students for the next grade level while Jachyra and Fusco (2016) discovered that teachers in Ontario felt that it was their duty to equip their students with strategies for standardized testing.

Similarly, the expectation for teachers to demonstrate concrete evidence of learning through documentation and quantitative results makes it difficult for them to implement play in their classrooms (Jachyra & Fusco, 2016; Baker, 2015). When early childhood teachers do implement play pedagogy, they feel the need to give play activities "academic tones" by renaming them, such as "active learning" and "work centers", or resort to using play as a break from learning (Lynch, 2015).

Educational policy also impedes a teacher's ability to implement play in the early childhood classroom. According to Pyle and Bigelow (2014), teachers in Ontario receive conflicting information from top-down management such as from the Ministry of Education and school principals. While the Ministry encourages the implementation of play-based inquiry, school principals still expect teachers to demonstrate children's learning through more traditional methods such as success criteria, learning goals, and anchor charts (Pyle & Bigelow, 2014). Additionally, the Ministry's strong emphasis on literacy and mathematics in primary grades coupled with their implementation of standardized testing through the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) creates a practical challenge for teachers, as they reconcile play-pedagogy with increasing assessment demands.

Furthermore, Pyle and DeLuca (2017) state that Ontario kindergarten teachers report assessment as a primary challenge to their implementation of play in their classrooms because it is difficult to systematically track evidence in an environment that is often "chaotic" and uncontrolled. This finding is mirrored in Martlew et al. (2011) who discovered that primary teachers in Scotland found it difficult to show evidence of learning beyond worksheets and other traditional forms of assessments. Even when teachers believe the purpose of play is for personal and social development, they still assess play for academic learning because they view it as their "professional responsibility" (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017) and as a means to justify play to parents who seek concrete evidence of learning (Fung & Cheng, 2012). Indeed, Fung and Cheng (2012) found that teachers in Hong Kong reverted to more traditional modes of teaching in circumstances where they were required to identify learning outcomes and demonstrate achievement.

Professional Development

The lack of clarity surrounding how teachers should implement play in early years' classrooms constitutes another barrier. With the introduction of new curriculum and the expectation to implement new pedagogical practices every few years, teachers find it challenging to implement play in meaningful ways because they lack the confidence and training to do so (Martlew et al., 2011; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). The research conducted by Fung and Cheng (2012) suggests that, although school principals should be taking a more active role in

professional development workshops on play pedagogy, they instead focus on "more academic" practices to meet parental demands. Other research indicates the need for more professional development opportunities in which educators discuss the value of play (Ranz-Smith, 2007) and ways in which they can facilitate learning through play (McInnes et al., 2011), along with the provision of tangible resources (Baker, 2015).

Creating engaging interactive play activities in early years' classrooms requires strong organizational skills. Because many young children lack behavior management skills, teachers may decide against including play in the classroom (Baker, 2015). Blucher et al. (2018) found that primary teachers, in comparison to teachers in nursery settings, may experience difficulties implementing play in the classroom due to larger class sizes. Teachers need professional development opportunities to learn how to promote behaviour management skills prior to implementing play-based learning in their classroom, especially with students who have trouble determining what play behaviours are appropriate and in which contexts (Docket, 2011).

Recommendations

After reviewing the literature, it is clear that support from all stakeholders in the school community is pivotal for the successful implementation of play in early years' classrooms. Thus, communication between all parties is essential. Deeper understandings of play and its role in learning can be fostered through strong parent-teacher partnerships (Breathnach et al., 2016) and communication with colleagues across different grade levels can alleviate pressure on teachers (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). As Kane (2016) suggests, dialogue between parents, teachers, policy makers, and researchers on the relationship between play and learning can create a "paradigmatic shift in societal perceptions surrounding early childhood education" (p. 298). Without this collective shift in mindset on the value of play in the classroom, teachers will continue to face barriers to its implementation.

Additionally, it is imperative that teachers be given professional development opportunities where they can share their beliefs about play and conceptions of play-based pedagogy with others. The Ontario Ministry of Education's advice to include play in the classroom simultaneously accompanied by the expectation to test curricular standards is contradictory. This causes confusion among teachers and therefore results in a lack of implementation of play. As a result, school principals and educational policy makers need to take a more active role in helping teachers develop strategies to successfully implement play-based pedagogy in early years' classrooms.

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