

Context and Implications Document for: A Scoping Review of Research on Play-based Pedagogies in Kindergarten Education

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Author's Introduction

Across a growing number of countries around the world, early years curricula have shifted towards following a play-based learning framework. However, there appears to be a lack of consensus both in research and in practice regarding the exact role and value of play for different types of student learning. This scoping literature review aimed to examine all relevant published articles on the subject of play-based learning in kindergarten/early years education (4-5 year old students). Although there is growing empirical support for the use of play-based learning strategies in early years settings, a bifurcated stance towards play is currently evident in the field. The majority of articles focused on the role of play for developmental learning (e.g., social/emotional development, self-regulation) recommend child-directed play and a passive teacher role, while the majority of articles focused on the role of play for academic learning (e.g., math, literacy skills) recommend teacher involvement in play and a much more active teacher role. Similarly, articles focused on teacher beliefs and practices have revealed divergent views on play and preferred classroom practices. This scoping review highlights the current binary stance towards play and the need to move towards an integration of perspectives and practices, in order to ensure that all areas of developmental and academic learning can be supported within play-based early years education.

Implications for Practice

Suggestions for professional development or training: The current article reveals that teachers across a number of recent studies report challenges with integrating the concepts of play and learning, and many endorse play as a teaching pedagogy but continue to use predominantly direct instruction. These results point to the need for continued professional training opportunities for kindergarten educators in order for play-based curricula to be effectively translated into practice. Specifically, clarity regarding the types of play activities that can lead to both developmental and academic learning, as well as the optimal role of the teacher, is currently needed.

Practical barriers to the implementation of play-based learning: The current review highlights the practical barriers to implementing play-based learning in early years education as reported teachers in the reviewed studies. These barriers include a lack of professional training, a lack of resources, large teacher-child ratios, and pressure from parents and other educators to engage in more direct instruction and achieve prescribed academic standards. This information is relevant for principals, educators, and administrators involved in kindergarten education in order to strive towards the successful and consistent implementation of play-based learning across kindergarten classrooms.

Best practice: By reviewing the relevant literature on play-based pedagogies, it appears that there is considerable evidence in support of developmental learning benefits for child-directed play, as well as academic benefits for teacher-directed play. This highlights the need to consider the use of an integrated perspective where both types of play are emphasized in the classroom. As a potential framework for best practice in play-based learning, play needs to be considered as beneficial for more than one purpose in more than one form, moving educators away from the current bifurcated stance towards the integration of both developmental and academic perspectives in a play-based environment.