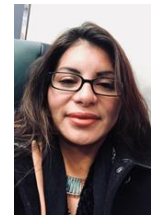Check for updates

SHOULD WE LET THEM PLAY? THREE KEY BENEFITS OF PLAY TO IMPROVE EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Ruth Guirguis[1]

[1]Borough of Manhattan Community College, USA
Email: Rguirguis@bmcc.cuny.edu

ABSTRACT

The topic of play and development has been of immense importance and controversy in early education and child development field throughout the twentieth century and into the present decade. The trend of current early education is to introduce academics sooner for younger students in order for programs to remain competitive and have parents choose more academically based preschools. The trickled down effect of State Standards has also pushed academics into the early childhood classroom more than a decade ago. Hence, reducing or at times leaving out time for active play in the classroom. In some classrooms, play is replaced by passive play led be technological games rather than imaginary play that involves peer interactions. Educators are faced with the challenge of reducing play and the benefits and politics involved in play. This article highlights the concept of play through the lens of Foucault and describes key benefits that can support the academic achievement of students as they continue on to later grades by changing the regimes of truth on play. This research highlights three major developmental aspects of play and their impact on early childhood development. Specifically, language development in Monolinguals and DLLs, self-regulation, and emergent literacy skills.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature regarding the importance and lack of play in the early years. This paper provides support and highlights the developmental importance of play as it relates to language/social skills in dual language learners, both cognitive and impulse control, and literacy skills.

1. SHOULD WE LET THEM PLAY?

Three Key Benefits of Play to Improve Early Childhood Programs

As the Common Core State Standards aim to rigorously prepare preschool to high school students in Literacy/Language Arts, Science, History, and Mathematics, the drive to have all students meet these standards has increased. Early childhood settings introduce literacy and mathematic activities to students earlier. In addition to educational reforms, parents are a crucial influence on pre-school children's academic development (Martinez-Pons, 2002; Bernier *et al.*, 2010). Parents add more tension to the educational push by educating their children before they enter preschool (Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, 2009).

Administrators are focused on strictly providing pre-school children with a curriculum driven program that fosters less time on structural and/or imaginative play (Ortlieb, 2010). Ortlieb (2010) stated, "dictator-like methods

of instruction may have worked for some, they do not provide for optimal learning experiences for most children today" (p. 242). Based on Foucault (1977) ideas about power, discipline and surveillance, what the pre-school child is taught is regulated by state, local and federal set learning standards. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power "explains why many teachers and administrators accept a daily regime of following scripted lessons and teaching to standardized test" (Levitt, 2008). Mac Naughton (2005) explained early childhood curriculum through Foucault's notion of regimes of truth in the following manner:

> The field of early childhood studies has grown through developing sets of truths about the normal and desirable way to be a child and an early childhood educator that are sanctioned and systematized by government, by professional associations and by the academy. (pp. 29-30)

According to Miller and Almon (2009) "the power of play as the engine of learning in early childhood and as a vital force for young children's physical, social, and emotional development is beyond question" (p. 8). Through play, children entering kindergarten develop problem solving skills, adaptive abilities, and social skills (Ortlieb, 2010). The lack of play created a growing concern, thought by experts, to be contributing to the "rise in anger and aggression in young children reflected in increasing reports of severe behavior problems" (Miller and Almon, 2009).

Bronson (2000) stated the lack of play does not only have cognitive and emotional effects during the early years, there are neurological and biological underpinnings. "Brain development, especially in the frontal lobes, support the child's growing cognitive control of attention, working memory, and problem solving" (p. 162). Diamond et al. (2007) reported, "preschool teachers are under increased pressure to limit playtime to provide more time for instruction. Yet, few activities so challenge children to exercise Executive Functions (EF) as does mature, social pretend play" (p. 17). The ability to direct behavior and self-regulate are associated with frontal cortex function and is linked to educational attainment (Spinella and Miley, 2004). Bronson also suggested the ability to use abstract thought and regulate cognition is located in the frontal cortex and preschool children's classroom environment becomes crucial in the development of the cortex. An early childhood classroom environment plays an important role in the development of the frontal cortex and the brain's neural connections and executive control systems in the frontal lobe. It is important that children are provided stimulating classroom environments and numerous social interactions. As such, my study will investigate play-based preschools and self-regulation.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The decrease in development domains such behavioral, emotional, and cognitive regulations is attributed to the decrease in the quality and quantity of play in preschools (Martinez-Pons, 2002; Bodrova and Leong, 2007; Miller and Almon, 2009). In Foucaultian terms, this decrease can be attributed to the control that politicians have on schools today (Levitt, 2008) and using "specific truths to control ways of thinking and being by invoking rules and limiting behaviours" (Mac Naughton, 2005). Social development is related to academic achievement, school readiness, and future success; the ability to control these behaviors and emotions requires guidance in developing and applying problem solving strategies and self-regulatory skills (Whitebread et al., 2009). This guidance is typically presented to the early childhood student in the context of social interaction or play (Bronson, 2000). The challenge arises when play is taken away from the early childhood programs and the play is replaced by test-driven curriculums resulting from current educational policies. This also relates to Foucault's regime of power framework when power is taken away from teachers and given to lawmakers and administrators (Levitt, 2008).

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Foucault (1980) provides accounts of power, knowledge, discipline, and surveillance that can be applied to the field of early education. Foucault described power as a struggle over how 'truths' build discourses about what is considered normal in order to produce and regulate people (Foucault, 1980; Mac Naughton, 2005). Specifically, government uses these truths or knowledge researched and collected over the years, regarding the cognitive

development of the preschool child, to set standards and suggest appropriate curriculum for use in classrooms.

According to The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), "the largest professional organization representing early childhood education in the United States" (Cohen, 2008) for example, sets and promotes standards for early childhood education and early childhood professional preparation programs. The NAEYC is a form of regime of truths that is used to evoke power over administrators, teachers and students on what is to be taught in the preschool classroom. Foucault (1977) described the experiences of children in comparison to the military and showed how both groups' individual freedoms were taken away by power holding institutions. Murray-Chandler (2009) stated, "children's movement, what they learn, and how long they learn it for, are all dictated by institutional power" (p. 57).

2.2. 'Regimes of Truths'

In the Foucaultian framework *regimes of truths* regarding normal development of the preschool child in education exist to in order to regulate appropriate pedagogical practices (Mac Naughton, 2005). CCSS have increased pressure for schools to become more academically oriented. According to Nadeem *et al.* (2010) academic pressure "trickled down even to young children, with a growing number of mandates imposed on early education programs to be responsible for young children's academic readiness and learning" (p. 766). Additionally, Nadeem *et al.* (2010) stated that "the prominent emphasis placed on academic achievement, when juxtaposed with the abundant scientific literature on the importance of social and emotional competencies for the long-term success of young children, suggests that some current educational policies may be misaligned" (p. 766). Nadeem *et al.* (2010) concurred with Miller and Almon (2009) finding that "long-term research casts doubts on the assumption that starting earlier on the teaching of phonics and other discrete skills leads to better results" (p. 7). Yet, the regime of truths established by government and carried out by state and local agencies focus on academics, not curricula focusing on self-regulatory development as the appropriate teaching *apparatus* in early childhood. It is this relationship between knowledge and power that governs the field of early childhood education.

3. PLAY

Children learn through play and it is because of this optimal relationship that exists between learning and play that has categorized play and development a complex phenomenon. "Play provides vital functions such as general and skill learning strategies as well as, creative thinking, positive self-esteem and divergent thinking" (Johnson *et al.*, 2005). The term *play* is difficult to define and articulate because play is abstract and has multiple meanings for different groups and individuals. Gordon (2009) defined play as a "voluntary movement across boundaries, opening with total absorption into a highly flexible field releasing tension in ways that are pleasurable, exposing players to the unexpected, and making transformation possible" (p. 8). Play allows for many different types of developments and gains in a young child. It is a medium through which a child learns to socially interact.

One: Preschool Play and Social Development

During play, children learn to interact with one another in ways that are acceptable in social contexts established by society, culture, and history. A preschool child's social competence is used as an indicator for school readiness (Mathieson and Banerjee, 2010). In the study conducted by Mathieson and Banerjee (2010) two and three-year olds were assessed to explore the roles that temperament and emotion have in the development of social competence through peer play. Parents and practitioners used a rating scale to indicate their own views of each child's socio-behavioral and emotional behaviors. These two assessments of the children were then compared to determined patterns of convergence and divergence along with results from assessments of children's receptive and expressive vocabulary.

Children, who imitate non-acceptable behaviors during play for example, risk not being allowed to continue playing with others- specifically referring to when a child is not following the rules in the given form of play and/or is being unfair. The politics involved in play teach preschool children to abide by rules, which later extend to abiding rules set in classrooms, society, or any other agency/institution. Mathieson and Banerjee (2010) connected the control in learning to follow rules and taking turns to temperament and behavior control and to attention/focus.

Spivak and Howes (2011) reported that peer play interactions that involve "pretense, make-believe, or fantasy and sometimes the explicit assigning of roles appears in a few studies uniquely related to children's prosocial behavior" (p. 4). The researchers described the following five different social and relational factors: (a) closeness of the teacher-child relationship, (b) emotional tone of teacher-child interaction, (c) observed social pretend play, (d) competency in pretend play with peers, and (d) positive social interaction among peers. From their research they concluded that "social pretend play positively related to children's prosocial behavior" (p. 16).

Spivak and Howes (2011) also stated that those children who engage in pretend play in early developmental period (birth to 4-5 year olds) are more prosocial in later periods. This competency is attained through pretend play that is associated with cognitive maturation, specifically language. For this current study, the goal is to examine play and adult scaffolded play as a main tool in developing social skills in preschool children. Scaffolding allows teacher to tailor the learning process to the educational needs of the child.

With respects to the Dual Language Learner population, socialization becomes a critical component in their overall development. DLLs are not only learning language but are also learning to be a part of a different culture and Integrating into social settings reduces risks for social and language problems (Chang et al., 2007). Socialization also allows for language development as it takes at least three to seven years for DLLs to develop English language proficiency in school settings (Chang et al., 2007). Castro et al. (2013) reveal that socialization can further support academic achievement in DLL students.

Two: Play and Emergent Literacy Skills

Play is a foundation for the development of oral language skills that children need in order to later extend to actual reading skills (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Language and literacy are the main focus in young children's experiences (Bridges et al., 2012). According to Bridges et al. (2012) language allows for communication leading the child to greater opportunities to learn and continue developing. Through the medium of play, literacy development is stimulated. Play offers children opportunities to integrate tools associated with literacy before starting actual literacy instruction. Print concepts, alphabet skills, and early literacy skills can be developed through the use of dramatic play, games, storybooks, and language experiences (Roskos et al., 2010). Guided play and early literacy programs have direct connections with academic curriculum and emergent literacy strategies (Roskos et al., 2010).

After conducting an ethnographic study, Wohlwend (2008) suggested that literacy play "situates children's combination of play, reading, writing, and design within a nexus of practice" (p. 332). Wohlwend applied a cultural-historical model through network sampling, teacher interviews, observations and surveys. Based on the findings, Wohlwend stated that when children engage in pretend play such as being the reading teacher in a classroom, children imitate their teacher's behavior and this imitation enables them to share and explore reading strategies with each other. Wohlwend also discussed how reading to play/playing to read, writing to play/playing to write helped "children make sense of books and multimedia through improvised play performance that affected their access and standing within peer and school cultures" (p. 333).

McClelland et al. (2007) suggested that "children with higher behavioral regulation achieved at significantly higher levels in emergent literacy, vocabulary, and math" (p. 955). McClelland et al.'s study consisted of a battery of assessments, administered with English and Spanish speaking preschoolers. It included background questionnaires, a behavior regulation task, and measures related to emergent literacy, vocabulary, and early math skills. Based on

McClelland et al.'s study, the level of growth shown in self-regulation skills predicted the level of growth in academic skills. Results also showed student gains in attention, working memory, and inhibitory control.

Through play, children develop cognitive and social skills as well as higher order thinking skills such as self-regulation. Self-regulation allows children to follow and comply with rules, manage emotions, and carry out problem solving tasks on their own (Bronson, 2000).

Three: Play and Self-Regulation

Bodrova and Leong (2008) stated that self-regulation is best taught to young children by allowing them creative opportunities in which to practice the rules of certain behaviors and apply those rules to new situations. Self-regulation "is a deep, internal mechanism that enables children as well as adults to engage in mindful, intentional, and thoughtful behaviors" (Bodrova and Leong, 2008). According to Bronson (2000) self-regulation is the core of being human and "it underlies our assumptions about choice, decision making, and planning" (p. 1).

Based on the Vygotskian perspective, the ability to act intentionally involves the internalization of higher mental functions that develop through social relations between parent/caregiver and child, teacher and child, or older peer and child. Self-regulation has also been defined to have two major factors. The first factor refers to the capacity to monitor inhibitory aspects. Inhibitory control refers to the ability to suppress impulsive thoughts or behavior and resist the surrounding temptations and additional distractions. The second factor is working memory, which is the ability of a child to hold, update, and manipulate verbal and non-verbal information. Self-regulatory skills represent an important developmental factor in young children as this allows them the control over their thoughts and feelings and their behavior.

Specifically, through scaffolded play, self-regulation is developed through the rules and roles that young children must learn to carry out as opposed to free or frivolous play. Children practice different forms self-regulatory skills during play. According to Bodrova and Leong (2008) children practice an individual and shared form of self-regulation. The individual form refers to a child's ability to follow rules and instructions of the game. The shared form refers to that child's ability to simultaneously monitor the behavior of others in regard to rules and instructions of the game. Engaging in play allows children to teach themselves appropriate forms of self-regulating behaviors, which they will become aware of and apply in different settings (Bodrova and Leong, 2008).

In a classroom setting the ability to self-regulate is shown when a child stops doing what they are engaged in when a teacher says to stop. This extends to an academic context because children's level of self-regulatory skills correlates to the level of attention given to math and literacy concepts in school (McClelland *et al.*, 2007). Researchers (Bronson, 2000; Whitebread *et al.*, 2009; Tominey and McClelland, 2011) suggested that the development of self-regulation allows for children to later self-regulate their learning, impacting their academic performances in a school setting.

4. CONCLUSION

With these three main benefits of play in the early childhood classroom, why is there a decrease in play? The current trend is to have young learners start academics early in life. These cultural changes have been accepted by many preschools as the new regime of truth with regard to how to educate young learners. Yet, there is a growing amount of research that supports the natural learning that takes place through play.

4.1. What Can Educators Do?

Educators can educate and advocate for students' right to develop other domains that are specific to literacy and mathematics. Early childhood educators are charged with ensuring that students are exposed to a holistic curriculum where young students willfully engage in learning. Often parents have a different definition of play than educators. They often define it as a non-structured period where learning does not really take place. In fact, parents

define play-based program as programs that do not set high standards or goals that will allow their children to thrive (Lynch, 2015). To some parents, play is not considered to be active learning as would a period of math (Lynch, 2015). This suggest that educators must use research to educate others about what play really is and what it means to early childhood d. The goal is to explain that play is a highly acceptable form or learning as is learning the basics of literacy and numeracy with the difference being children will be more engage and not know that learning is taking place (Lynch, 2015). For early childhood educators the play debate is not just critical to young learners' development but to the partnership between parent and teacher. Balancing the complexities and different perspectives of play and early childhood education as teachers, parents, and researchers is an ongoing challenge as educators attempt to reinstate new regimes of truth.

REFERENCES

Bernier, A., S.M. Carlson and N. Whipple, 2010. From external regulation to self-regulation: Early parenting precursors of young children's executive functioning. Child Development, 81(1): 326-339. *View at Google Scholar | View at Publisher*

Bodrova, E. and D. Leong, 2007. Tools of the mind: The Vygotskian approach to early childhood education. Columbus, OH: Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Bodrova, E. and D. Leong, 2008. Developing self-regulation in kindergarten: Can we keep all the crickets in the basket? Young Children, 63(2): 56-58. *View at Google Scholar*

Bridges, M.S., L.M. Justice, T.P. Hogan and S. Gray, 2012. Promoting lower-and- higher-level language skills in early education classroom. In E. C. Pianta, W. S. Barnett, S. M. Sheridan, & L. M. Justice. Handbook of early childhood education. New York: Gilford Press. pp: 299-323.

Bronson, M.B., 2000. Self-regulation in early childhood. New York: Guilford.

Castro, D.C., E.E. Garcia and A.M. Markos, 2013. Dual language learners: Research informing policy. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, Center for Early Care and Education-Dual Language Learner.

Chang, F., G. Crawford, D. Early, D. Bryant, C. Howes, M. Burchinal, O. Barbarin, R. Clifford and R. Pianta, 2007. Spanish-speaking children's social and language development in pre-kindergarten classrooms. Early Education and Development, 18(2): 243-269. *View at Google Scholar | View at Publisher*

Cohen, L.E., 2008. Foucault and the early childhood classroom. Educational Studies, 44(1): 7-21. *View at Google Scholar | View at Publisher*

Diamond, A., W.S. Barnett, J. Thomas and S. Munro, 2007. Online supplemental material for preschool program improves cognitive control. Science, 318(5855): 1387-1388. *View at Google Scholar | View at Publisher*

Foucault, M., 1977. Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison. New York: Random House Inc.

Foucault, M., 1980. Power-knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972- 1977. New York: Random House Inc.

Gordon, G., 2009. What is play? In search of a definition. In D. Kuschner (Ed.), In children to red hatters: Diverse images and issues of play. Play and culture studies. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 8.

Hirsh-Pasek, K., R.M. Golinkoff, L.E. Berk and D.G. Singer, 2009. A mandate for playful learning in preschool: Presenting the evidence. New York: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, J.E., J. Christie and F. Wardle, 2005. Play, development, and early education. Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn a d Bacon.

Levitt, R., 2008. Freedom and empowerment: A transformative pedagogy of educational reform. Educational Studies, 44(1): 47-61. *View at Google Scholar | View at Publisher*

Lynch, M., 2015. More play, please: The perspective of kindergarten teachers on play in the classroom. American Journal of Play, 7(3): 347-370. *View at Google Scholar*

Mac Naughton, G., 2005. Doing foucault in early childhood studies: Applying poststructural ideas. New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group Publications.

Martinez-Pons, M., 2002. Parental influences on children' s academic self-regulatory development. Theory Into Practice, 41(2): 126-131. *View at Google Scholar | View at Publisher*

Mathieson, K. and R. Banerjee, 2010. Preschool peer play: The beginnings of social competence. Educational & Child Psychology, 27(1): 9-20. *View at Google Scholar*

McClelland, M.M., C.E. Cameron, C. Connor, C.L. Farris, A.M. Jewkes and F.J. Morrison, 2007. Links between behavioral regulation and preschoolers' literacy, vocabulary, and math skills. Developmental Psychology, 43(4): 947-959. *View at Google Scholar | View at Publisher*

Miller, E. and J. Almon, 2009. Crisis in the kindergarten: Why children need to play in school. College Park, MD: Alliance for Childhood.

Murray-Chandler, L., 2009. Agent and subject of discipline: How novice teachers experience techniques of power. Doctoral Dissertation. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI 3372135.

Nadeem, E., K. Maslak, A. Chacko and K.E. Hoagwood, 2010. Aligning research and policy on social-emotional and academic competence for young children. Early Education & Development, 21(5): 765-779. *View at Google Scholar | View at Publisher*

Ortlieb, E.T., 2010. The pursuit of play within the curriculum. Journal of Instructional Psychology, 37(3): 241-246. *View at Google Scholar*

Roskos, K.A., J.F. Christie, S. Widman and A. Holding, 2010. Three decades in: Priming for meta-analysis in play-literacy research. Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 10(1): 55-96. *View at Google Scholar | View at Publisher*

Spinella, M. and W. Miley, 2004. Orbitofrontal function and educational attainment. College Student Journal, 38(3): 333-338. *View at Google Scholar*

Spivak, A.L. and C. Howes, 2011. Social and relational factors in early education and prosocial actions of children of diverse ethnocultural communities. Merrill- Palmer Quarterly, 57(1): 1-24. *View at Google Scholar*

Tominey, S.L. and M.M. McClelland, 2011. Red light, purple light: Findings from a randomized trial using circle time games to improve behavioral self-regulation in preschool. Early Education and Development, 22(3): 489-519. *View at Google Scholar | View at Publisher*

Whitebread, D., P. Coltman, J. H. and R. Lander, 2009. Play, cognition and self- regulation: What exactly are children learning when they learn through play? Educational & Child Psychology, 26(2): 40-52. *View at Google Scholar*

Wohlwend, K., 2008. Kindergarten as nexus of practice: A mediated discourse analysis of reading, writing, play, and design in an early literacy apprenticeship. Reading Research Quarterly, 43(4): 332-334. *View at Google Scholar | View at Publisher*