FAMILIES’ PERCEPTION ON PLAY IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING

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Abstract

Play has been emphasized as important for the development of children through years of research. Recently with the testing-movement emphasizing strong academics and cognitive skill, play is not always seen as important as more traditional learning for young children. This research sought to explore how families’ perceive play in the early childhood setting. Findings were that families’ perception of the role of play in the early childhood classroom did not change when measured against the age of the child or the setting for the play, school or child care. However, families’ perceptions of learning did change based on the age of their child. The younger the child, the less families were concerned about what was being learned and how skills were obtained through play-based instruction in the classroom.

Keywords: play, families, perception, early childhood, childcare, learning

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Introduction

In the fall of 2009, 18 preservice teachers enrolled in a junior-level early childhood curriculum class or student teaching experience at a small liberal arts university were asked the question, “Is play important to the early childhood curriculum?” Students were asked at the end of either a 10-hour practicum experience in the junior-level course or a 14-week student teaching experience in an early childhood setting. Students were to reflect on the question and write their responses. This question evoked similar responses amongst the students. Many recognized the value of play in the early childhood curriculum, but they were unsure how to incorporate it into the curriculum, how to convey value to others such as families, and why it is not more of a focus in the preservice training at the university level. One student teacher stated, “…of course it is important… I just don’t know how to make sure I do it in the curriculum with all that I have to teach?” Another student teacher stated, “I have been told it is very important. But I did not learn about this in my classes at school- this seems like a contradiction. But I know it is important and I hope to promote it in my class.” A third student “I feel like this is a trick question. I am told it is important…but we do more than play we learn? So am I confusing the two? Are learning and playing different?” If future early childhood teachers are confused about the importance of play, the practicality of play, conveying the value to families, and infusing it into the curriculum in a practical manner, then how can play be incorporated into the curriculum? If future teachers do not understand it, then how can it be prioritized?

The American Pediatric Association (Ginsburg, 2007) produced a report outlining the benefits of play and potential outcomes if opportunities for free-play continue to be reduced. This report identified family dynamics and the hurriedness that many children feel as they live their lives in a manner that rushes them from one structured activity to another (Ginsburg, 2007). At school, time is spent on structured academic activities and there is little opportunity for child-generated learning (Miller & Almon, 2009). Families of preschool-aged children feel pressure to make sure that their child is ready to enter kindergarten and seek preschool programs that convince families they are focused on academics (Plevyak & Morris, 2002). What will happen if children cannot engage in open-ended play? Predictions include limited social and emotional development (Ginsburg, 2007), reduced brain development
(Rushton, 2011), and delayed starting dates for kindergarteners making them older than their peers throughout school (Plevyak & Morris, 2002).

Researchers in the field of early childhood were concerned by the informal findings stated above and wondered if families of young children in various childcare settings saw the importance of play? If early childhood preservice teachers were struggling with the practicality of play in the classroom setting, then how could we expect families to see the value? This research seeks to understand how families perceive play and other learning that takes place in the early childhood classroom.

No Child Left Behind changed the landscape of school forever. The focus on accountability, both school and teacher catapulted everyone into an era of razor-sharp focus on curricula and the subsequent assessments that measure student performance. Schools moved from a function of educating the kindergarten through 12th grade population to struggling to survive expectations that every child participate and perform in a standardized manner. As a result, preschools moved into the public sector to better prepare young children for the rigors of kindergarten. Head Start was folded into the mix with its reauthorization in 2007 that had language about improving programs and holding them accountable for making sure children made progress meeting performance goals or funding would be withdrawn (Stipek, 2006). Other publically funded preschool programs soon followed suit as Head Start leads the field in policy and function. Several studies were published that noted the achievement gap between black and white students at the end of high school could be explained by the gap between these learners at school entry. This caused additional pressure to use preschool as a time to prepare young children, especially those from low-income families, with the cognitive skills they might not have when entering kindergarten (Stipek, 2006).

During this time, curricula at the kindergarten level continued to move from learning interpersonal skills in a social context (e.g., turn taking, waiting in line, and sharing toys) to learning the prerequisites for reading, mathematics, and science skills. Young children were tested and provided with instruction in literacy, numeracy, and scientific inquiry skills in preparation for kindergarten. Thus, the emphasis on play for children has been steadily decreasing because there is no time for it and it is not part of the standardized testing process in elementary schools (Miller & Almon, 2009). The current view on young
children is that they do not become more kindergarten ready based on how well they play with each other.

The definition of play and play-based instruction has taken many forms over the years since preschool became a focal point for preparing young children to increase their academic performance when they entered and progressed through the primary grades. Play means different things to different people. It covers a range of activities that occur inside and outside, with or without materials, and alone or with others (Pellegrini, 2005; Wood & Attfield, 2005). It can also be the process of engaging with the environment, making meaning of the social constructs of the world, and blending personal cultural experiences with those of peers (Corsaro, 2005; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999; Youngquist & Pataray-Ching, 2004). However play is defined, it usually includes some of both constructs; the materials or settings of play and the processes that make meaning of the world. Paley, an expert in the importance of play, defined play as, “the theater of the young-that make-believe world in which children act out stories” (Jacobson, 2008, p. 1).

To make play more acceptable in an academic world and to help make it possible to engage in play in kindergarten through 12th grade school environments, some teachers have distinguished play by re-naming it “inquiry”. Inquiry, always acceptable in the scientific community, seems to allow teachers, especially in the primary grades, to engage their young learners in play without as many negative comments and questions. Changing play to inquiry allows educators of young children to defend its use as providing young children with, “critical and reflective thought and promotes the attainment of the intellectual capacity of every learner” (Youngquist & Patary-Ching, 2004, p. 171).

Generally, the early childhood education community agrees that play is developmentally appropriate and a desirable activity for young children (Ginsburg, 2007; Rushton, 2011). Researchers continue to debate the role of play on development. Some researchers argue that limited research is available to demonstrate the connection between play and child development (Roskos & Christie, 2001). However, other examinations of research on play offer evidence to support the effectiveness of play on literacy, language, and cognitive development (Ahn & Johnson, 2005). Dyson notes, “Play is where children discover ideas, experiences, and concepts and think about them and
their consequences. This is where literacy and learning really begins” (The Science Teacher, 2009).

The American Pediatrics Association issued a policy report on the importance of play for healthy development. Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth. Play also offers an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 182).

However, to make sure that play continues to have a place in the lives of young children, it must be defended from an academic perspective; what does it contribute to the development of young children? Many researchers have found that play contributes to the development of socio-emotional, cognitive, language, and physical skills (Clements, 2001; Singer & Revenson, 1996; Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Steinhagen & Iltus, 2004; Wink & Putney, 2002). Hirsh-Pasek & Burchinal (2006) suggest that many of the skills children learn through play are exactly what school reformers covet: critical thinking, working collaboratively, problem solving, and developing confidence (Jacobson, 2008).

The Alliance for Childhood has published a report, Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School, that argues the value of play in the lives of young children,

Young children work hard at play. They invent scenes and stories, solve problems, and negotiate their way through social roadblocks. They know what they want to do and work diligently to do it. Because their motivation comes from within, they learn the powerful lesson of pursuing their own ideas to a successful conclusion. Research shows that children who engage in complex forms of socio-dramatic play have greater language skills than nonplayers, better social skills, more empathy, more imagination, and more of the subtle capacity to know what others mean. They are less aggressive and show more self-control and higher levels of thinking. Animal research suggests that they have larger brains with more complex neurological structures than nonplayers (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 7).

Play takes two paths when families become involved. One perspective of play is how it is used in the home. Many families assume children will play
at home and support this activity. As the value of play decreases in schools, efforts to promote play in homes garners greater attention. Family members can serve as effective play partners in efforts to promote social and cognitive development (Farver & Wimbarti, 1995; Haight, Wang, Fung, Williams, & Mintz, 1999). Additionally, cultural and gender differences can be effectively addressed through play interactions (Haight et al., 1999). Family members play a significant role in development based on their interactions during play. Specifically, maternal interactive behaviors during recreational or structured activities with young children can be associated with children’s cognitive, linguistic, social, and behavioral development (Hubbs-Tait, Culp, Culp, & Miller, 2002; Morrison, Rimm-Kauffman, & Pianta, 2003; Pianta, Nimentz, & Bennett, 1997; Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, & Baumwell, 2001; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004; Wallace, Roberts, & Lodder, 1998). This can include emotional support (Hubbs-Tait et al., 2002), linguistic responsiveness (Akhtar, Dunham, & Dunham, 1991; Fewell & Deutscher, 2004; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001), linguistic complexity (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1986; Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Cymerman, & Levine, 2002), and cognitive complexity (Roberts & Barnes, 1992; van Kleeck, Gillam, Hamilton, & McGrath, 1997). Qualities of maternal interactive behaviors have also been linked to children’s academic achievement (Connor & Cross, 2003; Morrison et al., 2003; Pianta & Harbers, 1996). Evidence suggests the importance of maternal-child interactions during play activities but little is known about the activities that families and children engage in during these interactions.

The other way families are involved in play is their perspective of the role of play within the classroom. Most families expect preschool children to play in their early childhood programs up to a point. When children are “getting ready for school (kindergarten)” it sometimes becomes a distraction from the academic focus of what families expect to be covered in the preschool classroom (Stipek, 2006). Families also recognize the importance of developing social skills that emerge through positive play with other children (Fogle & Mendez, 2006).

Jensen (2010) found that families’ opinions of play were related to their acceptance of creativity, as measured on the Parents as a Teacher Inventory. Families in this study were participating in a high quality early childhood center with a focus on developmentally appropriate practice. Families were aware of the importance of play for learning for young children. Curiosity is also used as
a measure of play. Chak (2007) found that families who believed knowledge increases through curiosity seemed to value the opportunity for exploration (play) for young children.

Cultural differences are also a consideration when considering the family’s perception of play. In cultures where hard work is valued, play is considered something children do until they are old enough to start working (Rivera, 2009). For children, “working” is study and learning, and, when home, children are expected to help their families with work tasks. For these families, activities in school are expected to reflect this perspective of working hard rather than playing for enjoyment.

Objectives

The researchers explored the following questions, (1) Is there a significant difference between the age of children in early childhood settings and their families’ perception of play in the classroom setting? (2) Is there a significant difference between the age of children in early childhood settings and their families’ perception of learning in the classroom setting? And lastly, (3) Is there a significant difference between income level and families’ perceptions of play and learning in the early childhood classroom setting?

Method

Participants

Of the 237 returned questionnaires, 205 were completed by mothers, 22 by fathers, 6 by grandparents, 1 by foster parents and 3 did not identify the person completing the form. To better understand the demographics, participants were asked what their combined annual income was. Out of the 237 participants, 222 reported their combined income. The majority of respondents, 115 (51.8%), earned between $75,000 to $149,999 annually (see Table 1).
Two hundred twenty-eight (228) participants responded to the question regarding age of child, and most participants (69.3%) had children either 3-years-old (36%) or 4-years-old (33.3%) (see Table 2). The mean age was 4.27 years (SD = 1.12).

Lastly, families were asked how many other children under the age of 18 were currently living in the home. Two hundred thirty-one (231) participants responded to the question regarding the number of other children living in the house, and 105 (45.5%) participants had one other child living in the house (see Table 3).
Measures
The 30- item questionnaire was designed by researchers to explore the research questions focusing on play and learning within a formalized childcare setting for children ages birth to five years of age regarding the families’ perceptions (Appendix A). The Likert items were rank ordered with 1 equaling ‘Not Important At All’ and 5 equaling ‘Very Important’. In addition to the 30 items, the questionnaire also asked basic demographic information about family members. Respondents answered questions regarding favorite activities to do at home with the child, age of preschool child at home, number of other children living in the house, relation to the child, and income level.

In the fall of 2010, the questionnaire was distributed to approximately eight childcare centers in two different states to be completed by families for children birth to 5- years old. Families were instructed to complete a questionnaire only for a child in their home if they received the questionnaire from the child’s teacher or caregiver. Families identified the age of their child for which they were filling out the questionnaire. Five-hundred fifty (550) questionnaires were distributed and 237 were returned for a 43% return rate. For analysis purposes, only questionnaires that were complete were used (N=192).

Procedure
To explore the research questions, researchers conducted a focus group of five families that had children aged 14 months to 5- years- old. Four out of the five participants were mothers and one father was represented in the focus group. Three out of the five families had two or more children, one family had one child, and one family had one child and was expecting the birth of the second baby within a month. All the families currently use formalized childcare for their children. The purpose of the focus group was to inform researchers how the main research questions could be explored in a questionnaire format. The focus group assisted the researchers in developing a questionnaire that explored how play and learning in an early childhood classroom was perceived by families.

Results and interpretation
All items on the 30-question instrument had high mean scores ranging from 3.43 (SD = 1.16, N = 192) (“how important is it for your child’s school to
have foreign language”) to 4.92 (SD = 2.9, N = 192) (“how important is it to help your child read/look at a book”). A principal component factor analysis was used to reduce the numerous questionnaire items to a few more reliable latent constructs (Kinnear & Gray, 2008; Justicia, Pichardo, Cano, Berbén, & De la Fuente, 2008) and explore the structural grouping of the 30 scale items to see if the families’ perceptions had any pattern in the structure on play and learning in the childcare setting (Chak, 2007). Eliminating the possibility of correlation among the factors, an orthogonal rotation was used to see how groupings of items measured the same concept (Kinnear & Gray, 2008). A Kaiser normalization was used to help identify factors.

Two factors were extracted using the Eigen value greater than 1.0 rule (Kaiser, 1960). The corresponding Eigen values and percentages of explained variance were 4.39 (25.11%) and 4.52 (17.96%) accounting for 43.07% of the variance. Items with loadings greater than 4.5 were retained in each factor (see Table 4). Factor 1 was renamed teaching and learning socio-emotional and academic skills; it contained 15 items and accounted for 25.11% of the variance. Factor 2 was renamed teaching and learning through play; it contained 4 items and accounted for 17.96% of the variance.

Table 4. Factor structure of families’ perception on learning/play in the classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. …your child to be able to utilize a computer?</td>
<td>.526</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. …your child to learn to spell their first name?</td>
<td>.596</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. …your child to learn to share?</td>
<td>.598</td>
<td>4.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. …your child to learn to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’?</td>
<td>.642</td>
<td>4.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. …your child’s school to have scheduled computer time?</td>
<td>.566</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. …your child’s school to have science time?</td>
<td>.669</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. …your child’s school to have a foreign language?</td>
<td>.511</td>
<td>3.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. …your child’s school to teach about bullies?</td>
<td>.509</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. …your child’s school to teach manners?</td>
<td>.610</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. …your child to learn to get along with others?</td>
<td>.563</td>
<td>4.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. …your child to take turns?</td>
<td>.656</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. …your child to be excited about learning?</td>
<td>.468</td>
<td>4.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. …your child’s school to instill values through their daily activities?</td>
<td>.476</td>
<td>4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. …your child to be understanding of people that are different than them in appearance?</td>
<td>.455</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Factor structure of families’ perception on learning/play in the classroom - continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30. …your child to be engaged in traditional academics (such as math, reading, science)?</td>
<td>.503</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factor 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. …children to play in school?</td>
<td>.623</td>
<td>4.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. …your child to play with other children?</td>
<td>.620</td>
<td>4.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. …your child’s school to have toys for playing available in the classroom during a large period of school?</td>
<td>.532</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. …your child’s school to have scheduled free play time in the classroom?</td>
<td>.547</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean scores for Factor 1: teaching and learning socio-emotional and academic skills and Factor 2: teaching and learning through play were created for each participant and one-way ANOVAs were used to explore each of the 3 research questions.

Families’ perceptions of play did not differ significantly across ages of their children, $F(5, 220) = 9.73, p = .435$ (see Table 5).

Table 5. ANOVA for Factor 2 Teaching and Learning Through Play by Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>38.94</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>.177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41.39</td>
<td>225</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significant at the $p < 0.05$ level

The questionnaire examined the perceptions of families with children ranging in age from under 12 months to 5 years of age. No significant difference was found between the ages of under 12 months to 5 years in the level of families’ perceptions of what role the childcare center/school held in relation to play (Factor 2). In examining the mean scores for each age group, the highest score of 4.56 was received in the 5-year-old category with the second highest mean score in the under 12 months category of 4.47. There is was no pattern when examining the means within the age groups.

Families’ perceptions of learning differed significantly across ages of their children, $F(5, 220) = 2.77, p = .019$ (see Table 6).
Table 6. ANOVA for Factor 1 Teaching and Learning Through Socioemotional and Academic Skills by Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>54.81</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56.03</td>
<td>225</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Not significant at the p < 0.05 level

In contrast to the first research question, there was a significant difference found between the age of the child and the families' perception of learning in the classroom (Factor 1).

Mean scores for the various age groups are presented in table 7.

Table 7. Descriptives for Factor 1: Teaching and Learning Socioemotional and Academic Skills in relationship to Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 12 months</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.8500</td>
<td>.22361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-23 months</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.5625</td>
<td>.59472</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-35 months</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4.4074</td>
<td>.49589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>4.5490</td>
<td>.49126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4.5132</td>
<td>.05459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4.4231</td>
<td>.11284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>4.5129</td>
<td>.49900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The highest mean score was 4.85 for the under 12 month-age-group, however, the sample size of 5 for this group was very small in nature. Similarly the second highest mean score of 4.5625 was for the 12- to 23- month range which also had a small sample size of 12. It would be interesting to investigate a larger sample of the ages 2 and under to see if similar trends would be found in comparison to that in this research. Further research is needed to conclude anything for the ages of 23 months and under from this study because of the limited sample size. Interestingly the mean scores for the ages of 3 and 4 years of age (4.549 and 4.5132 respectively) were somewhat close, as were the 5 year old and 24-35 month mean scores (4.4231 and 4.4074 respectively).

In examining the questions that loaded on Factor 1, it appears that families found it more important for children ages 3- and 4- years-of- age to learn these skills and be engaged in these activities while at childcare/school as in comparison to children in the 5- year-old and 24- to 35- month-old age
range. Perhaps the age range of 24- to- 35 months is considered too young by the families to be learning skills such as item #9 on the questionnaire, spelling their name, or engaging in traditional academics such as items # 17, 18, and 30. However, items #10, 11, 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27 and 28 look more at the teaching of the socio-emotional domain. Item #10 for example asks families if they find it important for children to learn to share or item #11 for children to learn to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’. The question becomes, do families not find this the role of the school? Or do they believe that ages 3- and 4- years-of-age should have already mastered some of these socio-emotional skills? Further research would be needed to explore this more in depth and to better understand these findings.

Families’ perceptions of play and combined annual income did not differ significantly across income levels, $F(5, 212) = .611, p = .692$ (see Table 8).

Table 8. ANOVA for Factor 2 Teaching and Learning Through Play by Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>37.48</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38.27</td>
<td>217</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Not significant at the $p < 0.05$ level

Families’ perceptions of learning and annual income did not differ significantly across income levels, $F(5, 212) = .889, p = .489$ (see Table 9).

Table 9. ANOVA for Factor 1 Teaching and Learning Through Socioemotional and Academic Skills by Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>52.024</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52.78</td>
<td>217</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Not significant at the $p < 0.05$ level

With no significant difference found between the combined family income and their perceptions on learning (Factor 1) and play (Factor 2), it could be concluded that income does not play a factor in the families’ perception on learning and play in the early childhood setting.
Conclusions

This study sought to find out the perceptions of families regarding play in the early childhood classroom. After considering responses from pre-service teachers about their conflicting feelings about the practicality of play in the early childhood classroom, researchers wanted to know if families of preschool children perceived the importance of play. After reviewing the responses from a questionnaire that gathered demographic information and families’ perception of the role of play in the classroom, researchers were able to determine that families’ perceptions of the value of play did not change when measured against the age of the child or the setting for the play, school or child care. However, families’ perceptions of learning did change based on the age of their child. The younger the child, the less families were concerned about what was being learned and how skills were obtained through play-based instruction in the classroom. This evidence is supported by research suggesting that family members with school age children often consider play to be a distraction from the academic focus in early childhood education today (Stipek, 2006). As children neared the more typical, formal school-age of six-years-old, the more concerned families were about what was being learned and how it was being learned. When asked about play in isolation, families seemed to support play without restriction. Similar findings are discussed by Fogle and Mendez (2006) who found parents to be supportive of play due to developmental benefits in the areas of social skills and behavior. However, when questioned about specific skills, families responded differently depending on the age of their child.

Limitations and Future Research

A lack of multiple measurement tools presents a limitation. In the present study, only one questionnaire was used. In addition, survey research provides an indirect measure of constructs using perceptions rather than direct assessment of play behaviors. Triangulating the data with interviews and observations would make the results more robust.

The small sample size of families completing the questionnaire presents a limitation. Especially when disaggregated by the age of the child, some age categories had drastically less representation than others. For instance for
research question number two, the under 12 month-age-group had a sample size of 5. Similarly the 12- to 23- month age group had a sample size of 12. Further research is needed to conclude anything for the ages of 23 months and under from this study because of the limited sample size. Additionally, the volunteer sample of families completing the questionnaire presents a limitation. The families of preschoolers voluntarily completed the survey; therefore, it is likely that this group of parents is involved in their children’s childcare experiences and has time to complete a survey. These characteristics may not be representative of the population. Additionally, reliability and validity were not established for the questionnaire. Further research would be needed to explore this more in depth and to better understand these findings.

The data collected for this study provided some information to answer the research questions; however, further study is needed to determine what factors influence families’ perceptions about learning depending on their child’s age. Findings in the current study suggested that age may influence family perceptions of play; thus, further investigations are necessary. Also, further research is needed to explore families’ perception of the role of the school in supporting socio-emotional skills for young children. Current research clearly supports the importance of socio-emotional development on cognitive, linguistic, social, and behavioral development (Hubbs-Tait et al., 2002; Morrison et al., 2003; Pianta, Nimentz, & Bennett, 1997; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004). Currently, little is known about how parents and educators of young children can determine the best possible collaboration of effectively support young children.

References


Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Ultimate</th>
<th>Parents Perception of Play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kent State University</td>
<td>Sarah Huisman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Development Sciences</td>
<td>Fall 2010 - Location 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dear Family,

We need your help to learn more about how children play and spend their time. Would you please complete the following survey about your child and how you feel about various activities that your child engages in? Your name should not be included on the survey. This survey will be used for research purposes. Please only answer the questions below for the child in which you received the survey from higher teacher/caregiver. If you have any questions about this survey please feel free to contact the researcher Dr. Stine Huisman at stinehuisman@jesuscollege.edu or 314.665.4033. Thank you for your time.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION. The following questions give us a little more background about your child.

1.1 How old are you child?
- [ ] Under 4 months
- [ ] 4 months - 23 months
- [ ] 24 months - 35 months
- [ ] 3 years
- [ ] 3 years +

1.2 How many other children under the age of 18 do you have living in your household?
- [ ] 1
- [ ] 2 or more

1.3 Please select your child's top five activities in or at home.
- [ ] Reading
- [ ] Playing with Legos
- [ ] Playing with toys
- [ ] Playing with friends
- [ ] Playing with family
- [ ] Playing video games
- [ ] Watching TV
- [ ] Music
- [ ] Playing house
- [ ] Going for a walk
- [ ] Watching children's videos
- [ ] Other (please indicate below)

1.4 If you selected "other" above, please identify these activities.

1.5 What is your child's favorite activity at home?

1.6 When you engage with your child, what is your favorite activity?

1.7 What is your family's combined annual income?
- [ ] Less than $30,000
- [ ] $30,000 to $49,999
- [ ] $50,000 to $74,999
- [ ] $75,000 to $104,999
- [ ] $105,000 to $149,999
- [ ] $150,000 to $199,999
- [ ] $200,000 or more

1.8 Who are you child's favorite adults?
- [ ] Teacher/pup
- [ ] Parent
- [ ] Grandparent
- [ ] Other

Thank you for your help!
## Important Activities

For the following questions consider how important it is for your child to be engaged in certain activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Climate</th>
<th>Parent's Perception of May</th>
<th>Comparison of Scores</th>
<th>N/A</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. **Children to play in school?**
2. **Children to play in the park?**
3. **Child to learn how to be accepting of others?**
4. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
5. **Child to be able to be a leader in the classroom?**
6. **Child to be able to play with others?**
7. **Child to be able to share?**
8. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
9. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
10. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
11. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
12. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
13. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
14. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
15. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
16. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
17. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
18. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
19. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**
20. **Child to be able to tolerate a long period of play time?**

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