

Play, Policy, & Practice CONNECTIONS

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From the Managing Editor . . .

This issue of **Play, Policy, and Practice Connections**, skillfully put together by Guest Editor Lisa Van Thiel, taps into the voices of some of the wise sages of play. The lead article, "Play Across the Human Life Cycle," by some of the founding members of the Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum, asks you to consider play from a totally different perspective than usual. They ask us to think about play at the end of the life cycle instead of the beginning. As many of us reach this stage of our lives, or have parents who are there, the perspectives these elders bring opens our eyes, hearts, and heads to a whole new way of thinking of play.

The other articles in this issue are by authors new to **PPP Connections**. They take us through the ways we can use play in teaching future teachers, teaching mathematics, and teaching science. Their words are based on years of experience in the field. Folks new or seasoned in the teaching field will find something to take away from the ideas within.

The PPP Interest Forum Facilitators have been working with the staff at NAEYC to plan a very special event at the NAEYC national conference in Anaheim next November. This "Forum on Play" will bring state and local leaders together with the folks who write some of the most respected books on play. Furthermore, we plan to offer examples of successful models for starting Play Interest Forums at the local and state levels. The session is called, "**Play: The Wellspring of Creativity and Social Resilience.**" Watch for more as November gets closer.

The Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum Facilitators have also been working hard this year on the new committee structure that was started in 2009. If you would like to be part of one of the committees, a listing of each committee chair and his/her contact information is on page 8 in this issue.

Please join us!
Sandi Waite-Stupiansky
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Play Across the Human Life Cycle

By

Marcia L. Nell, Walter F. Drew,
Ed Klugman, and Elizabeth (Betty) Jones,
with Renatta Cooper
and Elizabeth (Liz) Prescott

Play is important throughout the human life cycle. Early childhood educators have found the need to be skilled observers and scaffolders of play. Early childhood educators become experts at observing children--at kid-watching. That's how we have accumulated our wealth of knowledge about child development.

Likewise, caregivers for older adults and the elderly are well advised to consider this parallel, both in theory and in practice. One of the richest assets of older adults and the elderly is their past. Play enables them to reconnect with these memories in ways that promote healthy emotional and social development. All of us are becoming older, and, as students of human development, we are unusually well prepared to become competent *grandma/grandpa*-watchers. What is aging all about? Can we learn to support our elders and prepare ourselves for the developmental tasks of the last stages of the human life cycle?

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All of the authors are grandparents as well as early childhood professionals. All of the authors are obsessive about the importance of play. Mastery of play in early childhood sets the stage for a lifetime of mastery of developmental challenges. It makes us smart, curious, thoughtful choice-makers in whatever we encounter throughout our lives.

Children need the time, space, and support to play in order to develop self-knowledge and to understand their present life, but also to be able to understand their future. Children get ideas from watching and imitating other children and adults. Elders also need the time, space and support to play in order to reconnect with the past, re-creating it in order to make meaning from and with the past. Integrity or wisdom is developed as elders play and make meaning of their lives in the past, present, and future. Was it a good life? What will be remembered? What needs to be forgiven? What are they able to pass on to others?

Playing to Get--and Stay--Smart

“To understand is to invent,” wrote Jean Piaget. He continues. . .

In education we need to use active methods which give broad scope to the spontaneous research of the child or adolescent and require that every new truth to be learned be rediscovered. . . . A student who achieves a certain knowledge through free investigation and spontaneous effort will later be able to retain it; he will have achieved a methodology that can serve him for the rest of his life, which will stimulate his curiosity without the risk of exhausting it.

Education constitutes an indissoluble whole, and it is not possible to create independent personalities in the ethical area if the individual. . . must restrict himself to learning by rote without discovering the truth for himself. If he is intellectually passive, he will not know how to be free ethically. (1973, p. 107)

Toward the latter stages of the human life cycle the challenges are often ethical ones laden with deep emotion. Joan and Erik Erikson’s psychosocial human development stages identify the risks inherent in confronting each developmental task. In the later stages, the task is achievement of integrity/wisdom; the risk is despair.

I haven’t done what I wanted. I just did what others expected.

I failed my kids and they hate me for it.

I haven’t done enough to contribute to a sustainable, more peaceful world.

Integrity or wisdom requires that we resist denial, instead constructing for ourselves a positive vision of how we have lived, forgiving ourselves and others for

errors and lack of compassion, and finding humor and joy in the present moment in order to “go gentle into that good night,” which is death. While it may take a little longer for us elders to learn, play is an “active method” for generating hope and inspiration in place of despair. It offers a safe context for remembering, rediscovering, and creating a positive vision throughout life.

Playing for Mastery

Play is basic to the development of mastery, regardless of our age. In the earliest stages, play is focused on meeting and exploring bodily needs. Young children are practicing trust, autonomy, and initiative. What can I create? What can I make happen? If I do this, what will happen? In play, regardless of our age. . . we are acting on curiosity, make believe, experimenting with new possibilities, and reconnecting with earlier experiences.

Older children and adolescents are practicing industry, defining identity, and seeking intimacy. It’s the growth that happens in all these stages that equips each of us to take our turn as productive adults in the long, long adult stage of *generativity*. This is how we help to make the world work, and hold the responsibility for caring for both the very young and the very old.

Playing for Mastery in Aging

For a baby, the world is full of surprises. Aging brings its own surprises, with the opportunity both for new learning and revisiting throughout the whole of life. Somewhere in middle age or later, some physical or mental competence one has long relied on to function without notice, suddenly slows down and has to be re-minded, to be re-learned, and re-mastered. Those somethings come thick and fast by Eriksons’ Ninth stage. We have new challenges to be curious about, however unwilling we may be. Here’s where play skills, a reliable source for strengthening social resilience, are once again needed.

As change occurs and loss is experienced--unexpected outcomes may generate anger, despair or humor. Humor and laughter are the proactive responses to surprises. Oh my goodness, what have I to do here? What can I create? What can I make happen? If I do this, what will (or won’t) happen? The imperative is to be playful, to develop the skills and keep playing. Play and art-making beckon creativity and stimulates innovation. In this way play helps to generate hope and optimism and creates a sense of competence and mastery throughout life.

Wisdom and Transcendence

As defined by Webster, wisdom consists of the quality or state of being wise; knowledge of what is true or right coupled with just judgment as to action; sagacity, discernment, or insight, that is to see, to know. In *The Life Cycle Completed*, Erik Erikson writes in the chapter on Gerotrancendence:

I am still eager in my old age to activate words that sound a bit ethereal in order to make them lively components of behavior. With great satisfaction I have found that “transcendence” becomes very much alive if it is activated into “transcendence,” which speaks to soul and body and challenges it to rise above the dystonic, clinging aspects of our worldly existence that burden and distract us from true growth and aspiration.

To reach for gerotranscendence is to rise above, exceed, out do go beyond, independent of the universe and time. It involves surpassing all human knowledge and experience. How, for heaven's sake, is this to be accomplished? I am persuaded that only by doing and making do we become.

Transcendence needs not be limited solely to experiences of withdrawal. In touching, we make contact with one another and with our planet. Transcendence may be a regaining of lost skills, including play, activity, joy, and song, and, above all, a major leap above and beyond the fear of death. It provides an opening forward into the unknown with a trusting leap. Oddly enough, this all demands of us an honest and steadfast humility.

These are wonderful words, words that wind us up into involvement. Transcendence – that's it, of course! And it moves. It's one of the arts, it's alive, sings, and makes music, and I hug myself because of the truth it whispers to my soul. No wonder writing has been difficult. Transcendence calls forth the language of the arts, nothing else speaks so deeply and meaningfully to our hearts and souls. The great dance of life can transport us into all realms of making and doing with every item of our body, mind, and spirit involved. I am profoundly moved, for I am growing old and shabby, and suddenly great riches present themselves and enlighten every part of my body and reach out to beauty everywhere. (Erikson, 1997, p. 127)

Wisdom to discern self-truths, that is to see and to know, is one benefit that comes with the aging process, but it is not an automatic response to aging. Playing is the tool for the doing and the making by which such life truths can be self-discovered. Play provides the context for constructing meaningful self-knowledge and revitalizing the human spirit across the continuum of the human life-cycle, thus leading to wisdom rather than despair.

Play and Creativity in Aging

Joan and Erik Erikson suggest in their writing that the creative doing and making is a way of becoming. By

engaging in creative play and art-making experiences, older adults and the elderly find ways of creatively expressing their inner thoughts and feelings as they construct self-knowledge and reconnect with earlier life experiences. In our PlayLife we bring together the doing and the making and the becoming in the aging process.

Ed Klugman shares: *At age 84, I cannot face any activity that does not have imbedded in it a playful approach to the task that provides me with fun, joy, good feelings, challenges and oftentimes is accompanied by new learnings--like when I explore and play with materials I've never seen or touched before or learning to text my grandchildren in order to keep in touch. In the event it is not, I will make it playful. There are times when I am playing that I experience feelings and thoughts I've never had before and reminisce.*

Play is a transformative process as we express ourselves in creative ways and self-reflect on the experience. In reminiscing about moments of accomplishment and fulfillment we offset feelings of loss and isolation. Reminiscing earlier times helps to sustain and connect us with one another and remember who we are and what we have done with our life. When most of one's life is in the past then reminiscing--playing with one's memories--can bring both delight and pain, sharing and closure. Margaret Newman, one of nursing's foremost theorists, speaks of health as expanding consciousness; in this transformative process, creative expression and self-reflection plays a central place in contributing to improved health outcomes and quality of life.

Ed continues: *Trying to understand the similarities and differences of early childhood play and play as one ages provides me with new insights and connections which makes intergenerational living more possible for me. Who would have ever thought of “texting” as a pleasurable, joyful and fun activity? Have you ever tried to learn to read those tiny letters and communicate with your youngest granddaughter in order to find out about her latest ventures? Or my granddaughter who is studying culinary arts by working in a restaurant in Italy and sharing with me the latest creation of “Bolognese sauce” which she wants me to try and make and have me replicate it as I make new recipe discoveries and communicate about them. And then there is the realization that after open heart surgery I might not have the same strength and energy to climb the stairs even in my own home and of course I might not even be able to swing the bat or throw the ball as I once did any longer with my children and grandchildren. Young, middle aged, mature, and older learn to appreciate each other in new ways and how we can be together and play together both in virtual and real space.*

Where and When Can Elders Play?

These reminders from Ed illustrate how creativity awakened through sensory exploration is a way of revitalizing the human spirit. In this way, play is a source of renewal in the aging process, a way of reconnecting and regaining perspective and strengthening energies as we move through periods of transition often associated with loss of income, identity, usefulness, support systems, physical health, mental health, and independence. Just as with children, curiosity is sparked, imagination awakened. New meaning is made spontaneously in delightful and surprising ways.

According to Brian Sutton-Smith (2008) play therefore provides the context for emotional survival. Just as with children, expressive sensory activities such as playing with objects, music, art-making, or movement stimulates creativity, reconnects, revitalizes, and inspires optimism. Flexible environments that encourage these types of sensory activities enable older adults and the elderly to deal with the unexpected. According to Marc Bekoff (2010), play, a natural instinct, is “training for the unexpected” and there are plenty of unexpected experiences in the aging process. Those of us living with and caring for our elders can help to structure *flexible play environments* in which these sensory activities can be initiated, practiced, and mastered. These same sensory activities we employ to support young children’s creative play are being used with older adults and elders as tools to help restore emotional and psychological well being.

Liz and Betty spent many years observing and analyzing play environments for children. Thinking in those terms, Liz comments: *To me the Senior Center is an environment like preschool. It is set up with a variety of possibilities, that can be coded and analyzed much like we did this in our day care study (closed activities like puzzles, social games with rules like bridge, pool, Ping-Pong, structured exercise classes; open like art and writing, semi-open like ballroom dancing and the rhythm band). Homes are more like family day care with mixed ages and people carrying out the tasks of daily living. In both of them meals and snacks are available. There is also a soft area with cushiony leather couches and chairs, thoughtfully selected for easy getting out of. They recently replaced the carpet with vinyl tiles in a pattern that helps people pay attention to the floor and makes it easier for walkers, canes and the occasional wheelchair. To me our memoir group can be coded as dramatic play. (Prescott, 1997).*

Environments for elders vary a lot. They include their own homes, extended family homes, retirement homes, assisted living and convalescent settings. They also include day care, community centers for seniors, etc. They may include clubs, conferences, occasional meetings.

New Directions: Play: A Life Long Process

One emerging new practice in providing supportive play environments for older adults and elders is the “discovery retreat” that uses a nature preserve or wildlife refuge as an inspiring backdrop for play and art-making. The less formal open-studio structure of these retreats allows more freedom, time and space to explore and discover new interests, new possibilities while enjoying deeper awareness of the natural environment within a supportive, creative community. Each participant has opportunity to play with open ended materials. In this way the door is opened to art making as they explore, initiate and engage in naturally in playing and painting, sculpture, jewelry making, creative writing and poetry, movement and dance, weaving, mask making, photography, fishing, swimming, and nature walking.



Henry Olds, a participant at a recent oceanfront retreat at the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge in Melbourne Beach, Florida comments, *“I found that my awareness of the possibilities presented by ocean gifts on the beach was significantly enhanced. I was not looking for treasures so much. Rather, I was looking for the patterns revealed by various shells, stones, feathers, fish, sea grass, and flowering beach vines. And I was imagining how these patterns, captured with my camera and translated into photographic pattern pieces, might be turned into works of art that would celebrate the emotional power of the seashore. I created things that were different from what I was doing before. I began to get on a new track and develop my capacity to wonder and appreciate the incredible natural beauty in this environment that encourages wonder. Thanks to the comradeship of other people at the retreat, I found that I was not alone in my interest in the artistic potential of gifts from the sea. One person was creating jewelry with his findings from the shore. Another was incorporating his findings into a large dream weaving.”*

Thus the ocean environment was giving inspirational energy to participants, and this energy was reverberating through the retreat group as they engaged in play...the doing, making and becoming shared with each other.

Elders vary a lot in their energy, their mobility, and their mental awareness. Play can happen in all these spaces and groups. Unlike babies, whose learning is highly physical, older folks can be skilled players within their minds and memories as well as with their hands. Given a lifetime of social skills, they can share their play and art making with others.

Brian Sutton-Smith (2008) goes on to say “all of these expressive systems generate optimism about our life in this world; and they get this by displaying original ways of putting aside our pessimisms and depressions and boredoms and innovating a virtual life that is primarily a lot of fun” (p. 20). In this way we can improve the quality of life.



Play and Relationships

Familiar games with rules--sports, cards and puzzles and checkers--and make-believe play can be enjoyed in old age without time pressure. Ed asks: *Why would I want to play golf? I never expected to learn the game. But if I wanted to be with my best friend who had learned to enjoy golf in her early life, I had better learn or else miss out on her company. And so I am suddenly attracted to what one elder statesperson called “chasing a ball.” While I am not outstanding, I do enjoy the mastery of learning about when to use an “iron” and when to use a “wood.” I never imagined myself enjoying that sport, but I do want to be with my best friend and enjoy all the other attributes that it has for my good health...walking, being out-of-doors, while mastering what to do when that ball lands in high grass or on the green. Another component is that my friend likes to mentor me into the sport and enjoys her ability to guide me in the play. So there is the human connection, the reciprocity between the two of us as we enjoy an activity together.*

Play is a focal point for developing reciprocal relationships. In this case Ed enjoys learning about the intricacies of golf while his best friend enjoys sharing her expertise about golf. Play is a way of exploring the delights of the unexpected.

Games, rituals, and traditions are forms of play that offer collaborative opportunities to reflect and recreate. At a Sunday Brunch, older adults were

simulating the 4th Regiment of Massachusetts during Abigail and John Adams Days. They wore the regalia of the day and were accompanied by pipers and drummers entering the scene. One woman stated she enjoyed dressing up and being accompanied by her husband, dressed as a soldier of those days with a rifle in hand. She explained that she had always loved to get dressed up and play different roles. Her husband loved wars and playing soldier as a child. Today he enjoys the gatherings and attending different events where they, as a regiment, are featured. His wife commented that unless she too dressed up and participated, she would never see her husband.

Cooperative play engages individuals in responsive, respectful, and reciprocal relationships that are self-motivating, stimulating, and bring joy. Play is a source of energy for rekindling love, passion, and intimate relationships with other people. Grandparenting can be among the most delightful opportunities for play. Joan Erikson (1991) quotes a grandson’s comment made while they were berry-picking together and he noticed that he had more stamina than she: “Nama, you are old and I am new” (p. 115). In many societies, the older adults take primary responsibility for child care while parents are busy with other tasks. Young children, plants, and animals all need attention. Family members and neighbors may offer an alternative to professional child care, with benefits for both the young and the old. Intergenerational cooperative play creates and strengthens the reciprocal relationship.

Betty Jones recalls. . . *When my children were young and my child care needs were limited to several afternoons a week, their babysitter was an elderly neighbor, Mrs. Kimball. With up to eight children (mine and a colleague’s) ages 1 to 13 in the home, she settled into the rocking chair in the middle of the living room and served as the warm, wise, calm hub for the action. With baby Suzanne in her lap, reading picture books over and over, and the boys bringing her coffee on demand, she was relaxed and happy, and so were they.*

With age, there are gains--wisdom, stillness, slowing down in order to savor things previously rushed through.

From Beginning to End

The developmental challenges in aging are remarkably similar to those found in early childhood. Both very young children and older adults have a need to regulate their bodies, to move, to balance their bodies, practicing physical skills. We also need to regulate our emotions and respond to life’s experiences with flexibility and resilience. In the same way that we care for our children we need to care for older adults and the elderly. The human life cycle depends on play to sustain emotional well being, health, and quality of life.

We are challenged as we move through the human life cycle, to make peace with our lives. Peace is made through play--through openness to possibilities and creating alternatives. We end with the wise words of Joan Erikson,

Old age demands that one garner and lean on all previous experience, maintaining awareness and creativity with a new grace. . . We must become aware of how little we know. Perhaps we could wisely “become like little children” who are willing to live, love, and learn openly. (Erikson, 1991, p. 126)

Certainly some skills fall away and people lose memories of certain things, but I felt, and our daughters agreed, that in many ways, my husband of 40 years was becoming more himself as his memory failed. He had always enjoyed pruning and cutting, so he would cut boxes and plastic containers so that the trash would be minimal. He would cut them into fancy shapes and play with them. He would cut vegetables for stir fries. He could spend hours looking at photographs and certain old TV programs. He had always had passions and these remained.

I think that all of us who have survived living with Alzheimer's begin to realize that we could not control things, and that humor and flexibility (in other words, playfulness) were the only strategies that worked. EP

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Math Should Be Child's Play

By Greg Nelson
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Early childhood mathematics has received considerable national attention in recent years (NCTM, 2006; NAEYC/NCTM, 2002; NRC, 2001, 2009). the National Research Council, in their most recent summary of research on early childhood mathematics (NRC, 2009), comes to the following conclusions:

1. Children are capable of quite sophisticated math at quite an early age.
2. There is a definite sequence to how the mathematical mind develops, with earlier insights providing the foundation for later levels of discovery.
3. Children's movement through the developmental stages is determined less by their age and more by the environments they experience and the nature of the interactions they have in processing those experiences.
4. The current early childhood workforce does not have the training or resources to optimize young children's mathematical development.

The math we typically see in early childhood settings is teacher-led and group-based. Much of the math happens in circle routines such as calendar, class graphs, or number songs and finger plays. Periodically there are teacher-designed small-group math activities, but most of these are limited to simple counting or numeral recognition. Most involve little sense-making or discovery by the child. None of these group activities can rightfully be considered play.

What about math during children's free-choice time? Here children's opportunities to experience number are often limited to puzzles, spontaneous sorting and counting of objects, and props scattered around the room such as measuring tapes, money in the dramatic play area, and balance scales. Typically children use these materials in ways that foster social or motor development but not to interpret, compare, and manipulate numbers in conceptually sophisticated ways.

The Solution

If we want to limit our dependence on teacher-led, teacher-imposed mathematical tasks, but the math children experience in their unstructured play is of limited depth and intensity, what are we to do? Change what children play with. Rheta DeVries (2002) says play-based learning needs three components in order to maximize its learning potential:

1. Careful design of the environmental offerings on the part of the teacher to prompt broader and deeper investigations by the

children, taking into account their abilities and interests.

2. Children being free to choose how and when to engage with those offerings.
3. Careful observation of children as they pursue their investigations, joining them through conversations, open-ended questions, and scaffolding of thinking. Step 3 brings the teacher back to Step 1, and the cycle of scaffolded learning continues.

In looking for activities to add to the room, it is important to select ones that help children progress developmentally. Some of the aspects of early mathematical thinking that typically receive inadequate attention in preschool environments are:

1. *Pre-counting number sense:* Children need to notice similarities and differences in quantity before they learn to use counting as a way of understanding quantity.
2. *Estimation:* Once children know how to count and know that the count equals the quantity, they need to develop a sense of the relative magnitude of numbers; that is, they need to have a general sense what ten, twenty, or fifty of something looks like.
3. *Part-whole awareness:* Children need to understand that a number can be subdivided in different ways and still remain the same quantity. Better yet, they need to develop strategies for knowing what the missing part of a number is, if they know one of the parts.
4. *Numbers relative to 10:* Children who have learned to count into the teens, twenties, and beyond need to start to realize that those numbers are organized in sets of ten.

All of these number concepts are critical to children success in the early grades, and many children enter the grades without having developed them (NRC, 2009).

Child-centered, choice-based mathematical play is unlikely to flourish in a desert of undifferentiated, open-ended props or with teachers who do not join in children's play. The trick is to put more materials that are both appealing and rich in mathematical potential on the classroom shelves. Children can then independently choose and make sense of these materials on their own and partnered with other children. In other words, we can let the children play. We scaffold the mathematical thinking that emerges, but we are careful to help the children examine their own logic rather than impose our own. By proceeding this way, we as teachers can pay homage to our twin

masters of developmentally appropriate programming and standards-based outcomes.

Some Examples

Here are some examples of materials and activities I have used as free-choice offerings to give children more opportunities to refine their mathematical thinking:

- *Shopping Game:* Take ace through ten of hearts from a deck of cards and use whiteout to remove the numerals and symbols from the corners. These are the child's "shopping lists." Have a tray of intriguing items on the shelf to serve as the "store." The child looks at a shopping list, sets it down, then takes the shopping basket to the shelf to retrieve that many objects to set next to the list.
- *Showdown (or "War"):* Take ace through ten from two decks of playing cards and use whiteout to remove the numerals and symbols from the corners. Children divide the deck and turn over one card at a time, deciding whether they have the same amount of whether one child has more.
- *Tug-of-War:* A strip of tagboard divided into 21 squares serves as the game board. A playing piece is placed on the center square. Two children take turns rolling a die and "tugging" the play piece that many spaces towards their end of the board. When the play piece falls off one of the ends, that round is finished.
- *Bears in a Cave:* An upside-down box with a cutout serves as the cave. A set number of counting bears start out standing on top of the cave. While one child hides her eyes, another child moves some of the bears into the cave, leaving the other bears visible. When the child opens her eyes, she needs to guess how many bears are hiding in the cave.
- *Hi Ho Cherry-O (commercial game):* Children take turns spinning the spinner to move the 10 cherries from the tree into their basket.
- *Shaker Boxes:* An opaque box with a set number of pennies or bi-colored disks inside. One child shakes the box and then opens the lid, sorts the objects into two sets, and announces what number one of the sets has. The second child needs to figure out how much the other set is.



- *Toothpick Patterns* (or cue tips, craft sticks, etc.): Child or group of children use a pre-determined number of the toothpicks to make whatever design comes to mind, then come up with a different arrangement, and another, etc. Results can be captured in a class mural or an individual book of “Ways to Make _____.”
- *“How Old Are We?” Books*: A bowl containing 1”x1” green construction paper squares and another containing 1”x10” strips of blue construction paper, with lines showing the 1” increments. Children bring from home information about people they want to include in their book. They copy that information on a page and tape together green and blue strips to make a line as many squares long as that person is old. They then tape that column to the page, folding it accordion-style to fit onto the page. When they have done as many pages as they want, they create a cover, bind the pages together, and take a valued keepsake home.

These are but a few examples of how to include more high-powered, child-centered, age-appropriate math activities as available options during free play. I guarantee they won’t sit gathering dust on the shelves!

The PPP Interest Forum has a new committee structure that was formed in 2009. If you are interested in joining one of the committees, please contact the chairperson.

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Playfulness in the Age of Standards and Outcome Driven Curriculum

By Linda Witham Poisson, Renee Gould, Charlene Mara, and Meghan Martin
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In early September as the smell of fall is in the air, college students begin or continue their chosen educational paths. They experience new-found freedom and assume more responsibility for the decision making aspects of their daily lives. Values are formed that guide their careers and attitudes throughout life. At Quinsigamond Community College, in the Early Childhood Education Program, we believe that one of those values/attitudes critical for an early childhood educator is playfulness. Yet, we are constantly questioned as to the sustainable worth of this value when it seems to be at odds with the seriousness projected in the age of standards and outcome assessment focused education

Helping future teachers transition from *playing with children* (as they did so well during their babysitting days) to facilitating children’s higher level play (as professional educators are called upon to do daily) is a journey critical for the professional early childhood educator to travel. With an emerging understanding of child development, observations skills, and appropriate language intervention skills, future teachers begin to acquire the tools to support children’s play and help children obtain sustainable educational progress.

Those of us fortunate enough to work with prospective teachers of young children have seen their enthusiastic expressions and well met intentions turn to shock and surprise when we begin to discuss play as a primary source of learning for young children. Professors must first introduce students to a variety of educational standards. Students then learn about measuring the child’s performance using educational outcomes. Finally, when students begin to work in classrooms with young children, they are asked *not* to play *with* the children but, instead, *facilitate* children’s play—a crucial aspect of the teaching role. Students muse, “What an unfair distinction. Can’t we just all have fun together?”

Students in our program are offered a variety of experiences with play. In the beginning, students explore play by spending time in the classroom when children are not there. They are offered opportunities to build with blocks, dress up for a tea party or maybe paint at the easel. Everyone gets so busy doing and becomes so focused on their activity that they forget to look around. Then we ask them, much to their surprise, to tell us about another student in the play group. What did they see others doing? Responses include: “Oh, I thought you were going to ask me about what I made.” Or, “I didn’t notice but I made a really nice building out of these blocks.” Or “She just

played with the toys.” This exercise offers our students an opportunity to explore the depth of the play experience—for them as well as for young children. They begin to appreciate the process and understand it.

*NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standard 2:
The program implements a curriculum that is consistent with its goals for children and promotes learning and development in each of the following areas: social, emotional, physical, language and cognitive.*

By using the Massachusetts Early Childhood Program Standards, paired with the NAEYC Standards we remind our future teachers of the importance of the preschool environment, curriculum content and the processes of learning. We help college students balance the whole picture related to active learning for young children.

Often college students play with young children because they don’t know what else to do. They lack the skills to interject an appropriate open ended question at an appropriate time without totally taking over the children’s play. Modeling strategies often go unnoticed by the students because they are preoccupied with themselves and wanting to be “liked” by the children.

The Massachusetts Early Childhood Program Standards for Three- and Four-Year-Olds can be used to help the students improve their observation skills and their play intervention strategies if we incorporate these standards as discussion points and observation guides when college students are among real live children or observing children on a video.

For example, Standard Area 1D. Staff foster children’s INDEPENDENCE:

- 1. Staff provide guidance to assist children to solve problems and make decisions.*

Setting the stage before an observation of the possibilities this standard provides and the strategies for implementation helps students identify best practices even before they come in contact with them, making these practices stand out and be noticed by the students. Following up with a detailed discussion of their observations provides insight into the children’s development and helps the future teacher see the value of the play.

The exploration of play continues in our program with our more advanced students who are involved directly with children during their student teaching in the Quinsigamond Children’s School, our demonstration preschool. These students have opportunities to explore play and the child’s perspective as they learn about different curriculum areas in their college classes taken concurrently with their student teaching. For example, they might first learn about the theory of

art and then participate in a variety of artistic activities, playing with materials as children might do. The next step is for students to analyze the art activities based upon the outcomes stated in the Massachusetts Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences. Students experience the playfulness and then take it a step further as they justify how these activities contribute to the growth and development of young children. The final step is for students to analyze the activities they themselves plan for young children in their student teaching classrooms, connecting them to the guidelines. Through this method students are directly relating play to standards.

This process of connecting classroom activities to standards and outcomes will increase the learners’ appreciation for the framework that standards provide. However, if the extent to which we incorporate educational standards begins and stops with the memorization of them we run the risk of creating teachers discussed in the Alliance of Childhood’s, *Crisis In the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play*, written by Edward Miller and Joan Almon (available at www.allianceforchildhood.org). This report tells us kindergarten has changed radically over the past two decades. Two to three hours of literacy and math instruction and testing are now the norm. Further, twenty to thirty minutes per day, and often no time at all, is left for play.

Yet, long term studies suggest that early gains from this kind of learning fade away by fourth grade while those children who are products of a play based kindergarten education excel over others in reading, math, social and emotional learning, creativity and oral expression by age ten.

As college students return to our classrooms this fall, let’s be sure we incorporate playful learning experiences into our academic settings. Playful attitudes continue to flourish in preschool settings when those values, dispositions, and skills associated with play (independence, resourcefulness, emotional connections and social skills, concentration and focus) are supported and recognized. Early Childhood Education Standards can support this process for both preschool students and future teachers if we make the standards come alive in our classes.

The Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum special session at the NAEYC Annual Conference in Anaheim, CA

“Play: The Wellspring of Creativity and Social Resilience”

November 4, 2010
2:00-6:00 p.m.

2009 Patricia Monighan Nourout Award Winner Announced

At the Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum Business meeting in November, 2009, Dr. Walter Drew was awarded the 2009 Patricia Monighan Nourout Award for his work in the area of promoting play interest forums at the state and local levels, carrying on the work that Patricia began. Thank you, Walter!



Walter Drew, recipient of the 2009
Patricia Monighan Nourout Award

Standards and commercially- produced curriculum in early childhood education

By Jeff Winokur
Wheelock College

An undisputed major goal of early childhood education is to provide children with opportunities to build the skills and knowledge they will need in order to become successful in later schooling and beyond. However, the public discussions about how to go about meeting this goal are often political and emotional minefields. While language is designed to communicate and clarify, in discussions about education, language often makes things confusing. This is familiar to early childhood educators who try to explain “play” as something rigorous and serious for children to people who think of play as something frivolous. It is familiar to scientists who try to explain that the word “theory” means something very specific in science yet means something different in everyday language. As a college instructor and professional development provider in early childhood and elementary science education, I often find myself having some difficulty articulating my perspective because language actually gets in the way—and not just for people who are outside of the field—of engaging in real and useful dialogue on important

issues. When we discuss education issues in the public sphere we often resort to using words that have more than one meaning and also present the issues in terms of false dichotomies--phonics vs. whole language as one example--which force one to choose between extreme positions instead of encouraging people to reason for themselves to a conclusion which most often exists somewhere in between.

I have heard students and veteran teachers alike make statements about curriculum such as. . .

Worksheets are bad.

Standards will take away my ability to teach in a developmentally appropriate way.

Commercial curriculum makes early childhood classrooms too regimented.

Although I am sympathetic to these statements and have uttered my share of them myself during my teaching career, I take issue with many of them now. Take for example, “Worksheets are bad.” Consider Worksheet A, a kindergarten science worksheet (Topic: Motion), which asks children to “Circle the objects that need people power to move, and color the objects that burn fuel to move.” Worksheet B, from a different kindergarten science unit on motion asks children first to investigate rolling two balls of different materials and sizes down a wooden ramp. The worksheet then says: “Circle the word (choosing between “heavy” or “light”) that describes the ball that rolls the farthest after leaving the ramp.”

In the case of Worksheets A and B, I would say A is bad for many reasons, including:

- there is no indication the students have been actively investigating anything to do with concepts around motion;
- the intended concept itself (something like some things move as a result of human power, some by burning fuel) is of minor importance to students at this level; and
- there is a pre-determined “right” answer, not open for further discussion or investigation.

Though called a science worksheet, children have learned little if anything about science content and nothing about how science is conducted. Worksheet B, on the other hand, offers students opportunities to. . .

- investigate and observe an important concept about motion (having to do with exploring and describing various actions that can affect an object’s motion);
- record their findings; and
- return to the materials to investigate further.

The investigation engages children in science content (things move in different ways) and involves students in the processes of science. My point is that worksheets by themselves are neither good nor bad—it all depends on intent. If worksheets serve to guide

children to do their own thinking and investigation about relevant concepts, I support them.

What about commercial curriculum and standards, often viewed with disdain, at the early childhood level? As with worksheets, it depends on the purpose. For science, it is my contention that there is such thing as good science curriculum and that standards can be very helpful and need not be constricting to teachers. Many would agree about what children bring to the table in terms of early childhood science. Children are certainly curious—they ask many questions and are open to active investigation about how the world works. I often hear teachers proclaim that “children are natural scientists,” and “science is everywhere in the early childhood classroom.” There is certainly some truth in each of these statements, but they don’t tell the whole story. Children do have many attributes required of scientists, notably curiosity, but to truly become engaged in science requires training, such as in how to observe, how to record and analyze data, how to make claims based on evidence, and so on. Children must be taught these skills beginning in the preschool years in order to continue in science.

Science presents an interesting problem for teachers. Teachers of young children generally feel less prepared to teach science than they do other subjects such as reading/literacy and math. Teachers often feel their own science experiences have not prepared them with the knowledge to answer children’s questions and to know how to “correct” children’s naïve understandings. I would add that teachers’ own science experiences usually have not helped them to understand the nature of science and how to guide children to do their own reasoning. Early childhood educators know that teaching young children to read requires more than simply making books available—it requires a complex mix of talking, listening, reading aloud, phonemic awareness, all of which are essential to early literacy development. Learning to read includes, but is much more than, knowing what sound the letter “m” makes. Teachers know teaching math requires a complex mix of experiences with number, measurement, geometry, which includes, but is much more than, knowing that $2+3=5$. Science similarly requires much more than being able to identify and name a particular plant or animal. Because they don’t feel well-prepared in science, teachers of young children often cannot defend why they choose certain learning experiences in science.

Complicating what goes on in early childhood science teaching is the “emergent” approach to curriculum design. I have been engaged in discussions with pre-service and in-service teachers about how they decide what science children should be learning. Some say that they pay careful attention to children’s interests to see what emerges and then plan the curriculum around that topic. While I am attracted to the idea of child-centered curriculum, I feel that emergent curriculum as just described and applied to science is not always

beneficial—depending on what emerges. The topics that are most important for children to investigate at these ages will not necessarily emerge without adult intervention of some sort. The choice of topics for science investigation ought to be made by a knowledgeable adult. And what if the adult doesn’t feel knowledgeable enough to make that choice? That is where standards come in. Standards are there by design to guide these instructional choices. Standards are almost always written by a deliberative body, a group of knowledgeable people in the field, for the purpose of guiding instruction. They are rarely intended by the authors to be used as a list of facts for students to memorize for a standardized test, even though they are often interpreted that way at the program and school level. Why are they so often seen to be intrusive? Standards themselves are not bad, and can in fact be quite helpful; it is the interpretation of the standards where we often get into trouble. I advise teachers to get to know the science standards and try to understand the rationale behind them, and use standards to defend the choices they make for science experiences for children.

Commercially-produced curriculum can guide teachers, too, although teachers need support to try to identify what makes one particular curriculum material better than another. The best early childhood science curriculum reflects standards in that it deals with concepts in the physical, life and/or earth and space sciences, while at the same time, engaging children in scientific inquiry. It also guides teachers in certain teaching strategies that encourage children to do their own thinking about these concepts. Good curriculum can support children in science without disrupting their ongoing dramatic play in the block area, the water table, or outdoors.

I’d advise staying away from early childhood science curriculum that. . .

- is based mostly on books and print and not investigation;
- is based on activities that are craft-oriented;
- suggests that by doing a particular activity children will understand a complex concept (e.g., why some objects sink and some float);
- doesn’t support children to do their own thinking;
- doesn’t encourage children to build their own skills

As early childhood educators, we must remember that it is our charge to guide children into competence and success in later life. Let us be honest about what we know and what we do not know—and if we know we don’t know much about teaching in a particular domain—science, for example—why not look for help from experts? We’d do well to listen carefully to those who mean well on all sides of issues in education and learn to be more knowledgeable about how standards and curriculum can work for us, as intended.