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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

“To Play or Not to Play?” That is NOT the Question!

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Abstract

This paper presents a conceptual framework for understanding play and the role of the teacher in early years contexts from Kindergarten to Grade 3. This conceptual framework is supported by references to theoretical and practical frameworks related to play-based learning. The value of a conceptual framework to support school-based decisions about play in an early learning context provides a rationale for presenting the concept of pedagogical play in diagram form. The elements of the diagram and their descriptions are provided in detail, using theoretical and practical constructs. Next, a description of a typical early learning day is presented using the conceptual framework that is developed in this article. Lastly, the advantages of having such a framework to support teachers' professional development and preparation are discussed.

The title of this article is deliberately reflective of the famous Shakespearean line, “To be, or not to be: That is the question.” To play or not to play is not the question. Play is such a vital part of the development of children (Brown, 2009) that to suggest we should not promote and utilize this natural tendency of children is profoundly naive. But what if the question was reframed as: “What types of play should be included in an early learning environment?” This question promotes exploration of various types of play suitable for an academic setting and provides conceptual, theoretical, and practical frameworks for supporting the use of each type of play in early learning contexts. Our purposes in this paper are to identify these various types of play, to situate them in common research frameworks to show the role of each type of play in school contexts, and to identify an option for planning a typical early-learning day by incorporating all types of play.

Literature Review

Play-Based Learning

ShIPLEY (2008) has summarized some of the essential elements of play. In order to describe authentic play experiences, it should be assumed that the activities are pleasurable, symbolic, active, voluntary, process-oriented, and self-motivating for the children involved. Thus, although activities may be challenging, in order for an activity to be considered as a play experience, it needs to be enjoyable for the child and rewarding. The play experience must be voluntarily chosen even though children can be invited or prompted to play. ShIPLEY (2008) stresses that a child is immersed in the play experience without a sense of a specific end or goal. There is a definite element of engagement in the activity whether it is physical, verbal, or mental immersion with materials, people, ideas, or the environment. This definition of play assumes that the child is the initiator of the play experience and directs the activities according to personal needs and interests. However, other authors (Brown, 2009; Maynes, 2011) discuss other forms of play that also have academic purposes. Brown uses the term *work play* to denote this unique form of play. Play in an academic context is essentially playful; children engage in this type of work play because it is inherently enjoyable, motivating, and relevant to their immediate needs. Thus, the term ‘play’ can be interpreted in various ways, but overall, it includes the elements of enjoyment, motivation, and relevance.

Rationale for Play-Based Learning

There is long-standing research that supports the value of play experiences for children’s learning and development. Recent research is focused on brain development and the importance of stimulation and attachment on healthy growth of the brain. Play provides active exploration that assists in building and strengthening brain pathways. Play creates a brain that has increased “flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life” (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 9). When young children are engaged in play experiences that allow them to explore, identify, negotiate, take risks, and create meaning, they derive intellectual and cognitive benefits. Children who engage in quality play experiences are more likely to have well-developed memory skills, language development, and are able to regulate their behavior, leading to enhanced school adjustment and academic learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). Play that is initiated for specific learning and development goals is commonly called play-based learning. In some jurisdictions, play-based learning is a mandated philosophical approach to early learning in

schools, as in the Kindergarten curriculum in the province of Ontario, Canada (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Other authors and researchers may refer to this approach to play as *pedagogical play*.

Pedagogical Play

The present article acknowledges and recognizes that children's play has many opportunities for learning but, while open-ended play may focus on social development, schools also have an academic mandate that can capitalize on children's natural propensity for using play as a vehicle to support their learning. If the classroom and teacher provide options for children to choose among well-planned, varied learning activities, the probability of learning through play will be enhanced (Morrison & Newcomer, 1975; Zigler, Singer, & Bishop-Joseph, 2004). The term *pedagogical play* is being adopted in this article as an all-encompassing concept to describe the diverse play experiences that educators ensure are provided for children on a daily basis through careful planning and guidance including other forms of play that require less teacher guidance.

In a recent article, Fleer (2015) describes how teachers of young children can assume different pedagogical roles in relation to children's imaginary play. This study found that most teachers positioned themselves outside of children's play. Fleer (2015) presents a typology of pedagogical play with a range of positions from the teacher being in close proximity to the play, to the opposite end of the range, where the teacher is immersed and inside the children's imaginary play. This variety of roles equates to the teacher's intention to use the various forms of play for different purposes in the context of the school's mandate. This diverse range of pedagogical play roles forms the basis of the present conceptual framework of play in school contexts.

The Roles of the Teacher in Pedagogical Play

One of the most important aspects of the quality of children's learning is based on the teacher's pedagogical practices. There has been much controversy and debate regarding the role of the teacher in play situations with young children. At one end of the spectrum is a firm belief that adults are not to interfere with children's play, and at the opposite is encouragement for teachers to be actively immersed in the play experience, even at times leading the activity. Some notable theorists such as Vygotsky believed that adults' play with children is as important as children's play with their playmates. According to Vygotsky, adults could help children engage in play that children may not be able to initiate on their own (Seefeldt & Barbour, 1998). More recently, researchers have studied teachers' specific roles in play. Child-initiated, teacher-supported play is considered an important part of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Teachers have a key role in fostering play, especially when they are involved in appropriately supporting play. Several researchers have described these various teacher roles in supporting children's play (Griffing, 1992; Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Segal, 2004), including discussion of which roles have positive and negative effects on play. Tarman and Tarman (2011) have developed terms to describe the various roles that teachers may assume during play. These roles are described in the following paragraphs.

Onlooker. The teacher assumes an onlooker role when children are immersed in their play and the teacher is basically an observer, watching and listening. In this role, the teacher can

make verbal comments, smile, and use other nonverbal gestures. In the case of play, teachers must observe carefully “to determine whether, when, how, and with whom to intervene” (Zigler et al., 2004, p. 163). This role allows the teacher to learn more about the children and their skills and interests. Audit trails may be recorded by teachers to identify the concepts that a child is exploring in this form of play engagement, and such trails can be used to support effective leadership by the teacher in other forms of play. Teachers use audit trails to inform their decisions about possible interventions and may plan pedagogical narratives about how to encourage deeper thinking about concepts as children play. In this article, we refer to this type of play as open unstructured play, which may also be the play type used when the teacher acts as a stage manager.

Stage manager. Tarman and Tarman (2011) describe the role of teacher as stage manager when the teacher does not get involved in the play, but only helps children by providing suggestions and assistance to organize play settings, play materials, and props (Neuman & Roskos, 1993). This may take the form of a pedagogical narrative when the teacher poses related questions or rephrases children’s comments to encourage new understanding. “As stage manager, teachers can help to provide a theme for the play that organizes it around a set of common experiences or knowledge, and they can provide time, space, and props to enhance the play” (Zigler et al., 2004, p.163).

Co-player. As a co-player, the teacher participates in the children’s play. The teacher becomes a play partner and takes a minor role in the activity. During play, the teacher may model play skills, such as role-playing and peer interactions (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). As a co-player, the teacher may add conceptual language to name ideas the child is exploring through play. In this article, we refer to this type of play as intentional play-based learning.

Play leader. When the teacher assumes a play leader role, the teacher joins and actively participates in children’s play, perhaps enriching and extending the play. “The teacher gives direct suggestions or an explicit demonstration of how to carry out a particular pretend act or type of social interaction” (Griffing, 1982, p. 44). According to Johnson, Christie, and Wardle (2005), “adults often switch to this role when children have difficulty getting play started on their own or when an ongoing play episode is beginning to falter” (p. 273). Teachers may model academic skills as well as social skills in their role as play leader (Maynes, Julien-Schultz, & Dunn, 2010). In this article we refer to this academic form of play as purposeful, strategic play.

Aligning Teacher Roles with Pedagogical Play

In the literature, the role of teachers in pedagogical play has not been studied extensively (Fleer, 2015) but it is well accepted that teachers have an important role in developing children’s play (Bredikyte & Hakkrarainen, 2010). Wood (2014) raises an important distinction in relation to the teacher’s involvement in play experiences. She describes three models of play pedagogy: child-initiated, adult-guided, and policy-driven, where the latter is described as the mandate towards using play to achieve academic outcomes. In the present conceptual framework of pedagogical play, the three models of play pedagogy are accepted and aligned with the three forms of: open unstructured play; intentional play-based learning; and purposeful, strategic play.

The following chart illustrates the alignment of models of play pedagogy and roles of the teacher in each.

Open Unstructured Play	→ Child-Initiated	→ Teacher as Onlooker
Intentional Play-Based Learning	→ Child-Initiated/Adult-Guided	→ Teacher as Stage Manager and Co-player
Purposeful, Strategic Play	→ Teacher-Initiated	→ Teacher as Play Leader

Methodology

While many research papers present new data to support ideas and actions, others, such as this, instead explore concepts in an effort to support a position. In this paper, we use a combination of three frameworks to support our position about the role of play in an early learning school context. We are using the term early learning to refer to any child’s learning environment from school entry at approximately age 3.5 years (for the youngest children) until the end of primary education at about 8 years of age. The three frameworks we will use involve primarily a conceptual framework, supported by both practical and theoretical frameworks.

Eisenhart (2001) has provided a useful summary of the characteristics, advantages, and limitations of each of these frameworks in relation to the psychology of mathematics education. In this work, Eisenhart describes a conceptual framework as a skeletal structure of justification, rather than an explanation or description of experience. In a conceptual framework, authors provide an argument for different points of view, leading to a series of reasons for adopting some points and discarding others. Adopted ideas then serve as guides for future action and may reflect knowledge acquired from previous research and professional literature. Adopted ideas may be developed from an array of current and far-ranging sources and may be based on various aspects of different theories and on practitioner knowledge as each becomes relevant. The resulting conceptual framework would then be timely and reflect the current reality with the understanding that it must remain open to revision and reassembly as new knowledge is acquired and disseminated.

Conceptual frameworks have the advantage of being able to draw upon many perspectives and disciplines in their development, thus accommodating the perspectives of both those that exist inside the profession of teaching and those outside of the profession (e.g., parents, trustees, the public). Where conceptions can be defined and demonstrated in the context of their use, validity of the concepts is affirmed. A conceptual framework can also be used to address problems that are sensitive, useful, and timely.

While conceptual frameworks may stand alone, we will use both theoretical and practical frameworks to support the concepts that we will present about play in a school context. Theoretical frameworks rely on formal theory and use new data to confirm, extend, or revise a theory. In this way, theoretical frameworks are characterized by the same malleability as conceptual frameworks. Theoretical frameworks are useful to the extent that they legitimize academic work without constraining it. On the other hand, practical frameworks focus on the search for improvements in practice and have a “what works” (Scriven, 1986) filter for

framework strength. Research related to practical frameworks generally focuses on the search for solutions that have payoff for practitioners and accentuate the accumulated practical knowledge of practitioners, including the researchers and others who may inform the practice. To develop practical frameworks, the focus is on the conventional wisdom of stakeholders and seeks to extend, support, revise, and enrich practice. Scriven (1986) refers to this as an “exportable formula” (p. 59). Practical frameworks also have some pitfalls as structures for framing new ideas. These frameworks can limit new understanding by leading researchers to describe new understandings in terms of preexisting knowledge, rather than leading to the extension of knowledge which may require discarding, revising, or enriching an existing framework. Practical frameworks are also heavily bound by context. What such frameworks propose for one context may not be applicable in another. In the use of practical frameworks, researchers must also examine their own assumptions and biases and make these evident in their work.

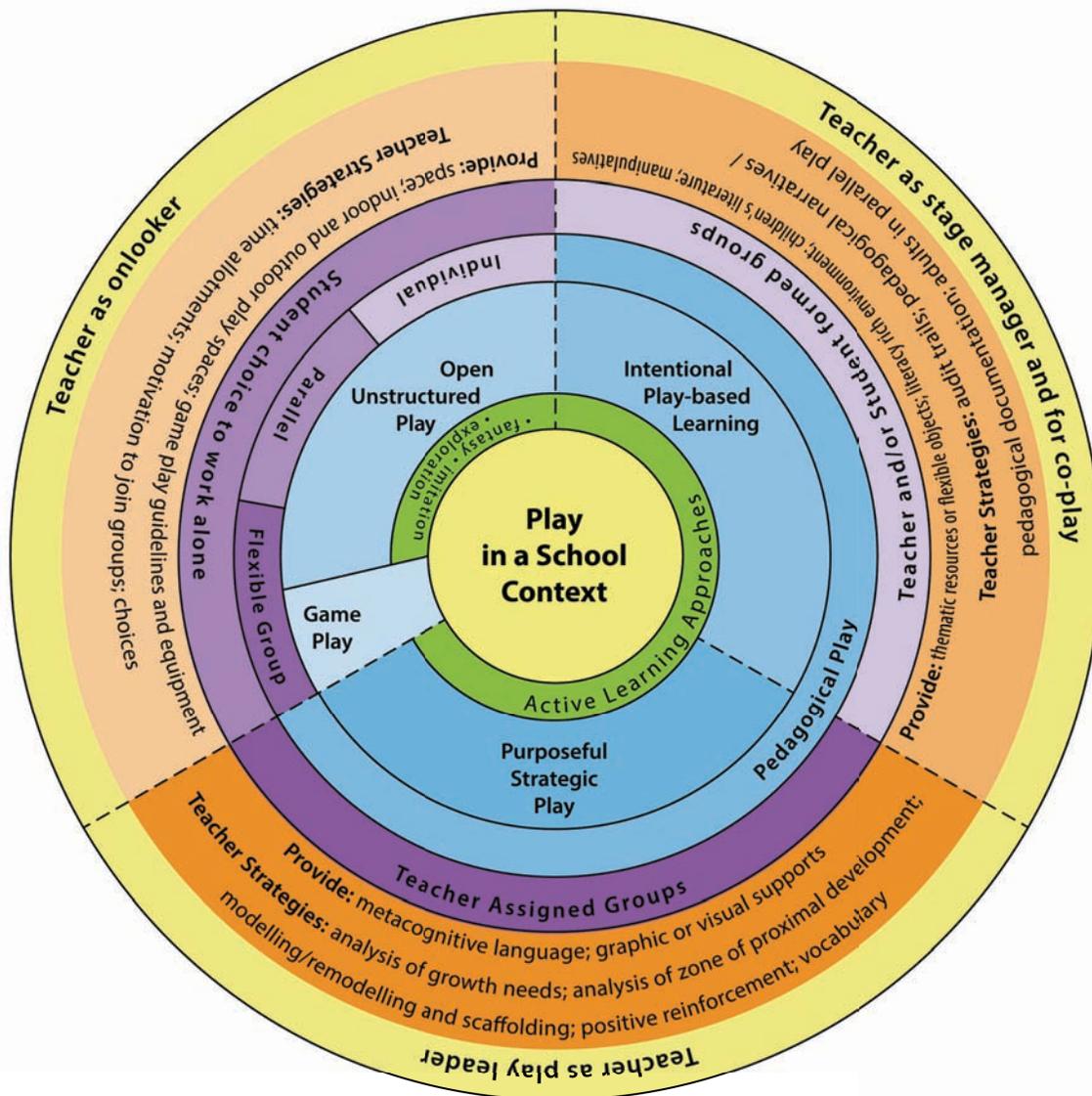
Defining Play and Playfulness

Play and playfulness are concepts that require clarity when we use them as conceptual frameworks for pedagogical contexts. In our conceptual framework, we use the term play to include any playful action in which children engage for any social, personal, or academic purpose. This is consistent with the explanation of play used by Shipley (2008) and includes work play (Brown, 2009), student-initiated play, and teacher-initiated play. Playfulness refers to the nature of the play and is characterized by its ability to be engaging, interesting, pleasant, and active. Playfulness can be built into well-designed work play to guide the achievement of academic goals. In a work play context, while consolidating and applying new learning, children come to expect that they will need to undertake certain tasks as defined and structured by the teacher. To maintain the play environment in this new form of play, teachers must ensure an active learning approach is sustained. The use of graphics or visual supports, high impact strategies, positive reinforcement, age appropriate breaks, chunking of information, and age appropriate vocabulary will help children to embrace these purposeful learning opportunities and take pride in their achievements. These conceptions of play and playfulness are consistent with the research of notable authors who have investigated early learning (see for example, Bredikyte & Hakkrarainen, 2010; Fler, 2015; Wood, 2014).

Explanation of the Conceptual Framework for Play

In order to communicate our vision for the use of play in learning contexts with young children, we present a diagram to capture the elements of play and the relationships among various types of play. In developing this diagram, we subjected it to the four requirements for a conceptual diagram as identified by Strauss and Corbin (1990). These requirements include ensuring: 1) the fit between the diagram and conceptions of play include evolution from diverse data and adherence to the common universal reality of experienced early years teachers; 2) the ability of the diagram to support understanding of these concepts for teachers; 3) the applicability of the conceptualizations in this diagram to broad contexts; and 4) the potential of the diagram to provide direction about its applicability and to support future action related to teachers' decisions. In the following sections of the paper, we will explain the elements of the diagram (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Play in a School Context



PLAY IN A SCHOOL CONTEXT

Data and Background to the Conceptual Diagram

Recent controversy about play in the early learning school context has positioned play as the opposite of learning (White, n.d.). Also, researcher Jane Hewes (2015) reports that “Early childhood is changing and competing priorities in early learning and child care, such as preventing obesity and ensuring school readiness, can crowd out the possibility and benefits of play that is controlled and directed by children themselves” (para. 5). This view is reflected by other researchers who champion the role of play as a pathway to learning for young children (Blinkert, 2004; Clements, 2004; National Children’s Bureau Play Safety Forum, 2002).

The diagram (Figure 1) is intended to conceptualize all forms of play as an inclusive model to guide the strategic use of play in a school context and to help educators, parents, and caregivers understand how various forms of play function within an early learning program. The following paragraphs will explain Figure 1 and our practical and theoretical basis for this conceptual diagram.

First, we should recognize that play in a school context is unique in that some forms of play may have purposeful objectives based on the academic curriculum for the early years. In non-school contexts, play may be totally experienced as a form of exploratory engagement for children, depending on the intentions of parents and other caregivers. In a school context, some open and unstructured play should blend with play characterized by intentionality to learn. In all types of school play, active learning approaches should be used consciously. Active learning is characterized by: play contexts, hands-on opportunities, manipulative use, cooperative interaction, and opportunities for reflection. Active learning is playful.

When the public thinks of play in a school context, it may be that they incorrectly think of play exclusively consisting of one type of play (e.g., open unstructured play). Our model separates play into three types: open unstructured play; intentional play-based learning; and purposeful, strategic play. Open unstructured play may take place indoors or outdoors, may involve choice of equipment such as blocks, balls or hoops, or may allow children to use any natural objects for play as found in the local environment. In school contexts during open unstructured play, teachers provide time, motivation to join others in their play, and perhaps identify choices when children show some reluctance to engage in play. During open unstructured play, children may choose to work alone in individual play, or may play in parallel with other children or join and leave flexible playgroups as they choose.

During open unstructured play, children choose how to play, where to play, with whom they play, the object and time of their play, play duration, and how, when, and if they interact with others. Some experts in children's play divide play into 'kinds of play' and explain that some kinds of play show greatest incidence at various ages, ranging from 0 to 8 years (Hewes, 2015). These age-related kinds of play may include: exploratory play/ object play/ sensory play; dramatic play such as solitary pretense; construction play; physical play; socio-dramatic play; games with rules; and games with invented rules. Alternatively, our model examines play in terms of how children choose to interact or not interact during open unstructured play that allows for a conception where the children have total control. These choices can be seen as individual play, parallel play, or flexible group play. In parallel play, children may play with the same objects while not actually interacting with each other, but perhaps experimenting alone based on what they observe in others' play experiences. In flexible group play, children may choose to share space, objects and/or goals but move freely into and out of situations as they choose. No effort is made by teachers or teaching assistants to interfere with open unstructured play aside from monitoring for safety and informally observing (e.g., audit trails) to relate their observations to future structured learning. During open unstructured play, teachers provide time, space indoors and outdoors, choices, equipment options, and, as requested, game rules and invitations to join groups. Low-organization games may be started by teachers during open unstructured play time, but children are free to join or leave games as they choose.

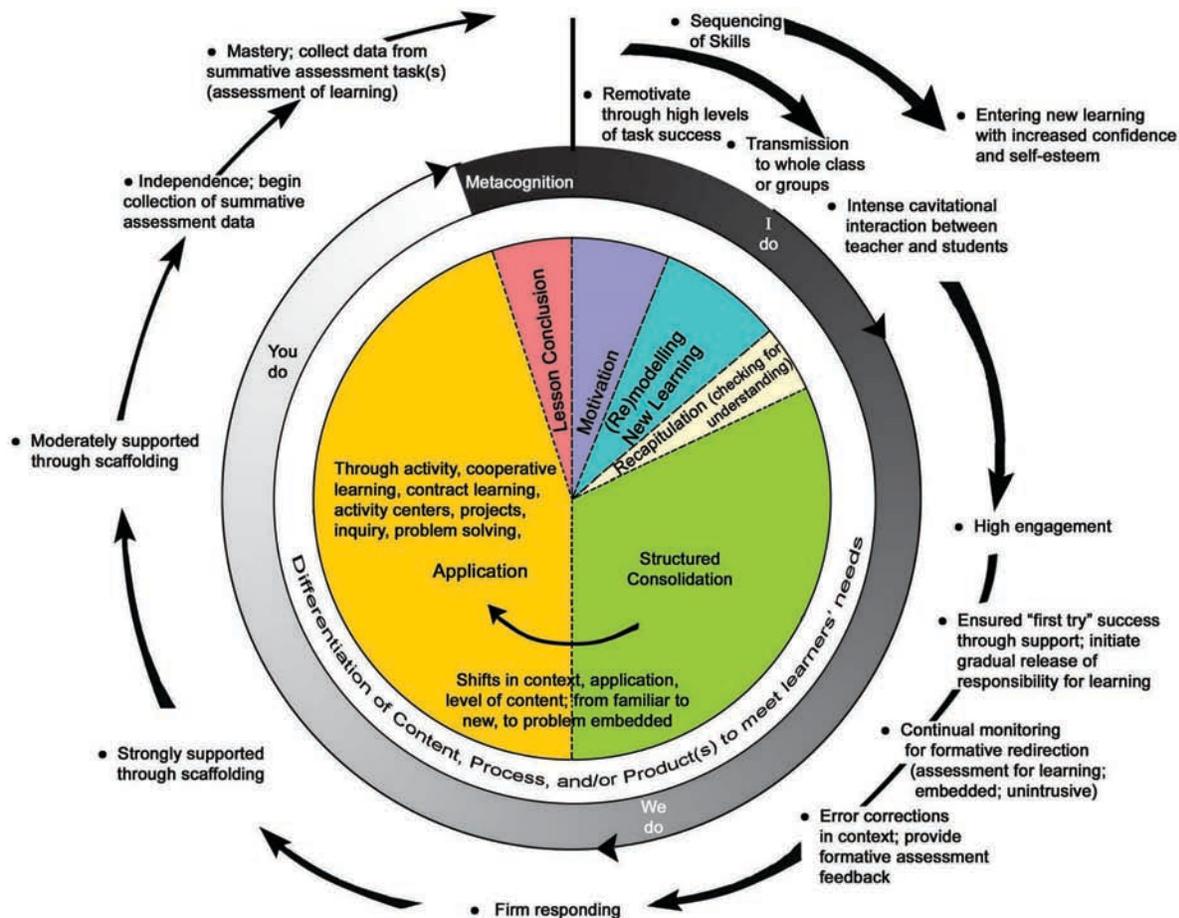
Intentional play-based learning has its origin in unstructured play. With this form of play, teachers and teaching assistants make careful observations of children's play choices and create detailed observation notes (e.g., audit trails) of children's choices and the nature and progress of their play within their chosen focus. However, during this play, teachers may intervene to ask questions that may direct related play in ways that extend concepts (e.g., pedagogical narratives).

This may include naming something a child is doing. For example, as a child plays with a boat at a water table, teachers might engage the child in discussion about the play object and use words such as float, weight, sink, load, and others to encourage the child to talk about the experiences that are part of their play. Teachers may make notes about what the child is exploring and may choose, at that time or later, to introduce new materials to the context. For example, the teacher may provide toy boats made of different materials and introduce the word buoyancy, thereafter allowing the child to investigate buoyancy in the various boats. During this play episode, the teacher might engage the child in a pedagogical narrative that focuses on directing the child to investigate, name, and extend new concepts.

Teachers can create an audit trail of records which record ideas the child seems to be exploring and internalizing, thereby providing some instructional guidance about what concepts the child may be ready to repeat, extend, enrich, abandon, and modify in future play. This approach to play takes advantage of a child's readiness and zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1933/1976), recognizing that "children don't play in order to learn, although they are learning while they are playing" (Kalliala, 2006, p. 20). When teachers interact with children during this type of play, they have opportunities to add language to new concepts, opening the door to enrichment of each mental image and connections among ideas. During intentional play-based learning, teachers provide thematic items or flexible objects, a literature-rich environment, and may use strategies such as audit trails, pedagogical narratives and documentation, parallel play by adults to motive exploration outside of the child's zone of proximal development, and manipulatives. To follow up on this type of play, teachers may choose to read certain texts to children to affirm their explorations or may provide appropriate picture books or big books for individual exploration. By providing rich text that reflects intentional play-based themes, teachers reaffirm the validity of children's play themes and may extend the scope of their play.

The third form of play that should be evident in an early learning school context is purposeful, strategic play. This type of play has specified learning goals that are appropriate to the age and developmental level of the children as a group (either small group or whole class). Purposeful, strategic play should reflect phases of instruction (see Figure 2) and should provide differentiated supports for success for each student (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Phases of Instruction in Purposeful, Strategic Play

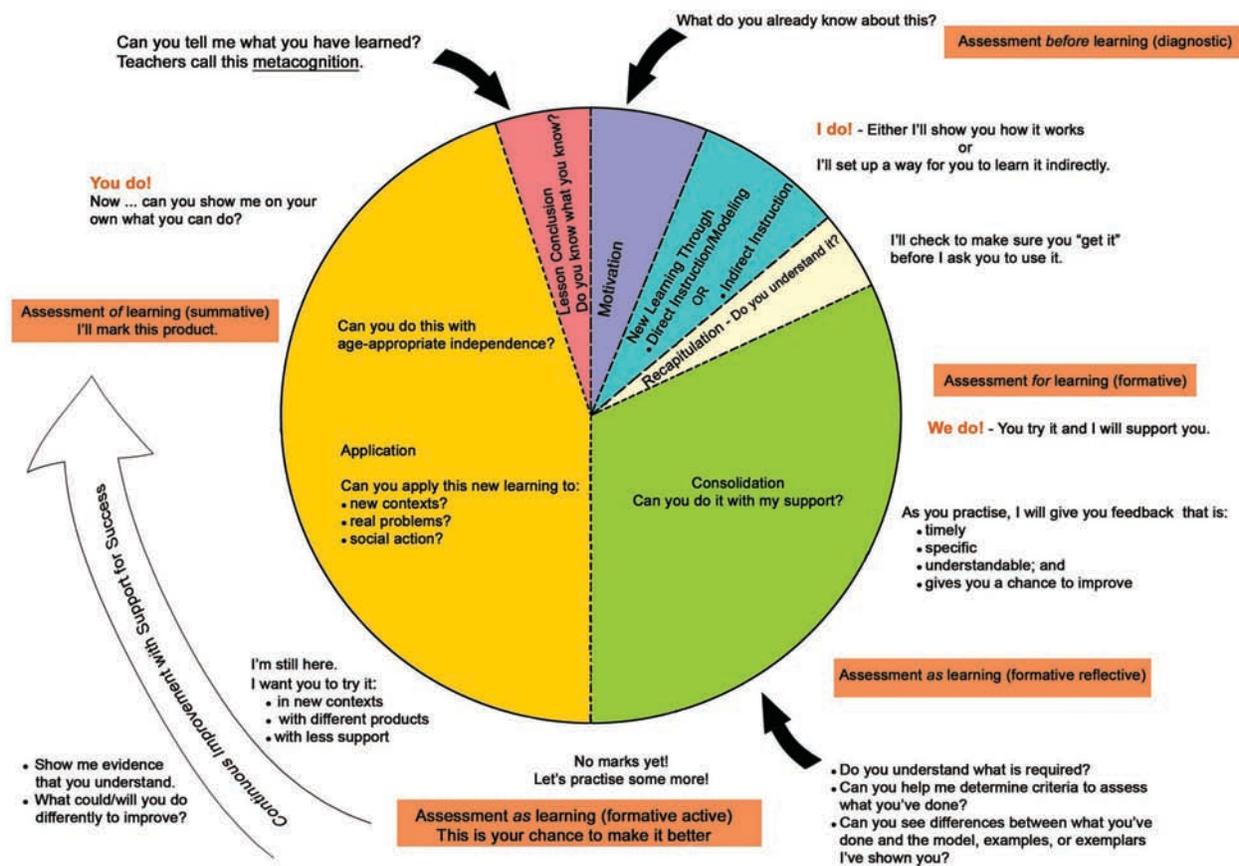


Teacher modeling has a key role in purposeful, strategic play. This type of play assumes as a first consideration that the teacher has chosen modeling as the most effective way to teach the children a concept or skill. This might include tasks such as forming a letter with a pencil or it may include something more complex such as making shades of colors by mixing primary colors in different quantities. The play component with learning episodes that start with teacher modeling comes as children are challenged to consolidate and apply their new learning (see the green and yellow wedges in Figure 2). As children consolidate what they have learned, they will have opportunities to play with relevant materials and ideas in closely monitored contexts, where teachers or early childhood educators or educational assistants may use audit trails and observe solid learning being exhibited during consolidation. They then move the children, either individually or in a group, into the application phase, where students have more independent opportunities to play with the ideas or skills in new contexts (Fisher & Frey, 2007). To foster and consolidate learning by the child, the teacher adds language to the play context to help children verbalize their new understandings and skills. This approach encourages recall and the children develop metacognitive awareness – they know what they know (Flavell, 1979; Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994). Although the concept of metacognition can be traced back to the writings

of Aristotle, considerable research into types of metacognition and strategies for promoting is more recent. In young children, metacognitive awareness might be evidenced by claims such as “I can count to 100,” or “This is a triangle.”

In purposeful, strategic play, the teacher’s role is complex. Before modeling can be successful, the teacher must undertake a careful analysis of the growth needs of the students. This may result in children being grouped, as some may be ready to learn a new concept while others may not be ready yet. By analyzing a child’s readiness, teachers determine the child’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1933/1976) in relation to the intended learning and decide which children can currently be successful with the new learning and which children need more development in related concepts.

Figure 3. Differentiated Supports During Play to Increase Children’s Independence



N. Maynes, 2010

Many pedagogical concepts are included in the figures, which may be familiar to teachers; further descriptions of these terms are available in related publications (Maynes, 2014; Maynes et al., 2010). In purposeful, strategic play teachers may introduce the concept of work play (Brown, 2009) to children.

To help young children become aware that they are learning and to be aware of exactly what they are learning, many early years teachers use concrete materials to signal a focus on these two key ideas. For example, teachers might teach students to use phrases such as “We are learning to...” or “What I’m looking for...” and such phrases can be used to help young children understand the quality of work they should aim towards as they play to consolidate and apply new learning. Through teacher scaffolding and the use of exemplars of the quality of work that is expected, examples can support the play environment while encouraging a playful atmosphere for achievement.

The Nature of the Teacher and Playfulness

There is little doubt that the nature of the teacher affects the quality of the instruction that children receive in their classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2000). The nature of the teacher also affects the playfulness which children experience during purposeful, strategic play (work play) during each phase of instruction. In the following chart (Figure 4), two approaches to a purposeful, strategic play episode are described. One approach is more obviously playful than the other and represents the type of play-filled learning environment that would be most desirable in an early learning context when purposeful, strategic play is used. This approach is juxtaposed with a more formal academic approach that might be used by teachers who are not mindful of the need to structure learning in a play context.

Figure 4. Purposeful, Strategic Play Approach Compared to an Academic Approach to Early Learning

Learning Goal: Represent and describe numbers 2 to 10 in two parts, concretely and pictorially.

Phase of Instruction	Purposeful, Strategic Play Approach	Academic Approach
Motivation	A puppet play is shown to the children. Children are asked to show their favorite parts of the play for any 2 (3, 4, 5, etc.) players.	Children point to the numbers 2 to 10 on a chart and say each number as they point.
Modeling New Learning	Children are shown how to change the appearance of any one character in the puppet play by adding a selected number (2 to 10) of costume items to their selected character. They randomly select the number of items they may use to change their character from a bin with the numerals 2 to 10 written on them and they must announce how many items they were allowed to use before they present their altered character.	Children are shown a specific number of items in a group and how to write the number on the board/chart or how to select it from a Smart Board display.

Consolidation	Children work in cooperative groups of 3 or 4 to dress paper dolls for their own puppet show. Each member of the group has a set of items to contribute to the group's task (e.g., one child has all lower body items such as skirts, slacks, jeans, shorts; another has all accessory items such as purses, backpacks, sunglasses, shoes, etc.). The children must present their characters and explain and show how many of each item was used for each character.	Children use a worksheet with the numerals 2 to 10 written into one set of boxes on the sheet and they draw a set of items to match each of the numbers (e.g., 5 umbrellas).
Application	Children plan a puppet play for the class and explain how many times each player in their play speaks (2 to 10), or how many costume changes each player had, etc.	Children work alone or in small groups to sort items into groups of 2 to 10 as directed.
Lesson Conclusion/ Metacognition	Students can name numbers 2-10 and demonstrate their use through action. They understand that numbers can be used to limit something ("You can only choose 4") or extend something ("You should have at least 5") as they evaluate each other's puppet plays and how well each play met the requirements (e.g., number of costume items used, number of speaking lines for each character).	Students can name numbers 2-10 and show each number by concrete sorting and by drawing pictures of the selected number of items.

Teachers will recognize that these stages of a lesson could apply to other early learning topics such as seeds and plants where students might also be guided to count in increasingly independent contexts. In playful, purposeful learning, teachers can also design strategies with depth that have the potential to allow integration of content from the curriculum. In the example provided in Figure 4, children can also be learning drama concepts and social skills as they learn to identify and name numbers. It should be evident from these examples that purposeful, strategic play is playful; effective early learning teachers must make efforts to make these two concepts align.

Using Activity Centers for Consolidation and Application

Activity centers are a common feature of early learning classrooms. Centers may be: fixed, such as a computer center or painting center; thematic, such as a pumpkin baking center; or rotating, such as a Math center, where the center is fixed but the skills practiced at the center rotate for

skill practice opportunities to change over time. Regardless of the type of centers that are used in early learning classrooms, teachers should try to ensure that each center is used to consolidate or apply ideas that are learned through the three types of play that are identified in Figure 1. Centers will be particularly important to the completion and extension of skills and knowledge acquired through purposeful, strategic play since the goals of this type of play are very specific.

Building Play Types into an Early Learning Program

In the province of Ontario, efforts have been made to help practitioners plan the learning day (for example, see <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/childergarten/whatwillmychildlearnanddo.html>, a site developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education to explain full-day kindergarten to parents and educators). In the following example, we provide an overview of one way to structure an early learning school day to incorporate all types of play into the schedule for each day (Figure 5). This example assumes the use of nutrition breaks throughout the day, rather than traditional recess/lunch breaks.

Figure 5. Example Play Schedule in the Early Learning School Day (Junior/Senior Kindergarten)

Time of Day	Type of Play Incorporated into the Day
9:00 – 10:30	Purposeful, strategic play
10:30 – 10:50	Nutrition Break
10:50 – 12:00	Intentional play-based learning
12:00 – 12:40	Nutrition Break with open unstructured play to follow
12:40 – 1:20	Purposeful, strategic play
1:20 – 2:00	Small group or individual, intentional play-based learning and optional open unstructured learning
2:00 – 3:00	Open unstructured play and small group or individual purposeful strategic play option

This is one example of how a learning day could be structured. Teachers can redesign the day to be sensitive to their context and the needs of their students. In later early learning contexts/grades, less open unstructured play might be used while more intentional play-based time might be structured within the normal day. In this example, the three types of play are distributed throughout the learning day to address children's attention, learning needs, grade levels, and energy levels. The schedule could change each day as the teacher chooses to address various specific learning outcomes and also to reflect the developmental stage and age levels of the early learners.

Conclusion

Play is consistently recognized as an essential element of children's growth and development (Blinkert, 2004; Clements, 2004; National Children's Bureau Play Safety Forum, 2002). However, in the face of public uncertainty about the relationship between learning and play, and surrounded by safety issues related to some play circumstances, the public may be unclear about

the value of play in a school context (Hewes, 2015). In response to pressure about defining the role of play in schools, teachers need the support of a strong and clear conceptual framework for play, based on theoretical frameworks and practical constructs.

This article has presented a conceptual framework for play in school contexts. This framework is represented in three conceptual diagrams. The first identifies three types of play that are evident in effective early learning contexts. The three types of play are: open unstructured play; intentional play-based learning; and purposeful, strategic play. All three types of play are supported by considering the resources, strategies, groupings, and teachers' roles for each type. Purposeful strategic play is explored further by examining how its evolution may be experienced through effective pedagogy. An example of how the three types of play might be planned for inclusion in an early learning schedule is presented for consideration.

It is our belief that these three conceptual diagrams will support further professional dialogue about play and its value in various forms of learning contexts. These conceptual diagrams also allow teachers to consider how various types of play may evolve as children mature and their developmental levels affect their learning needs. It is evident that all types of play need to be valued and balanced within the school day, allowing young students to experience the joys and rewards of learning.

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