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# **Play in the Ontario Grade 1 Classroom: Teacher Beliefs and Barriers to Greater Implementation**

Joshua Speedie

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## **Abstract**

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This study explored Ontario Grade 1 teacher beliefs and practices regarding play as an element of developmentally appropriate practice. The results, which are drawn from six interviews conducted with Ontario Grade 1 teachers, indicate that lack of time, insufficient funding, the school environment, inadequate professional development regarding play, and the Ontario curriculum constrained Grade 1 teachers from carrying out greater play activities within their program. This research underscores a shift in pedagogy between kindergarten and Grade 1, and that the early primary classroom is a difficult environment in which to carry out developmentally appropriate practices.

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**T**ransitioning from play-based kindergarten to a more rigid Grade 1 environment is a critical period for every child's social and academic development (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). According to Varhagen, Morrison, and Everall (1994), between the ages of 5 to 8, children's cognitive development proceeds at a fast rate, and their learning capacity, memory span, and speed of cognitive processing all grow rapidly. During this period of life, play is considered a vital vehicle for children's growth and maturation (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Runco, 1996; Tsao, 2002). Moreover, play "nourishes every aspect of children's development – it forms the foundation of intellectual, social, physical, and emotional skills necessary for success in school and in life" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006, p. 2). Play is also significant in curriculum and theory at the Kindergarten level both in Canada and worldwide (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2005; Moyles, 2005; Murphy, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Quebec Ministry of Education, 2001). Highlighting the important transition from play-based kindergarten to Grade 1, this research paper examines play in Ontario Grade 1 classrooms.

### **Purpose**

While developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) such as play-based learning have become cornerstones within the implementation of the recent Ontario Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), it is also critical to be mindful of what have been described as abrupt changes in pedagogical approaches as children enter Grade 1 (Glauert, Heal, & Cook, 2007). The importance of play in developing children's social skills, emotional adjustment, and cognition does not conclude when they leave kindergarten. According to Hartmann and Rollett (1994), "the sudden curtailment of play... hampers creativity and may in the long run, cause an impaired identity formation" (p. 196). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children classify early childhood as up to 8 years old (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), yet there is not adequate space, time, or materials for play in the majority of Grade 1 classrooms (Hartmann & Rollett, 1994; Patton & Mercer, 1996; Yeom, 1998).

Teacher beliefs have an effect on classroom practices (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & Hernandez, 1991; Martin, Yim, & Baldwin, 1997; Smith & Shepard, 1988; Stipek, Daniels, Galluzzo, & Milburn, 1992), so further understanding of teachers' beliefs about DAP and play in the Grade 1 classroom may reveal certain gaps between theory and practice. A deeper understanding of factors that inhibit or promote Ontario Grade 1 teachers' use of play within the classroom has the potential to be useful for teachers, parents, administrators, researchers, policy makers in Ontario, and the broader international educational community. If the principles of play-based learning are to be successfully extended into the primary years, potential barriers preventing play must first be identified and addressed.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors motivate or discourage Grade 1 teachers to implement play?
2. What are the perceived factors that inhibit or promote Grade 1 teachers' use of play within their classrooms?

## Literature Review

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) as “practices which promote young children’s optimal learning and development” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). According to NAEYC (2009), the three main components of DAP are: knowing about child development and learning (based on current research and practice); knowing what is individually important (recognizing each child’s learning style, strengths, weaknesses and preferences); and embracing what is culturally important to each child (socially and linguistically). Guidelines for DAP “seem to apply equally to children of all ages” (Maxwell, McWilliam, Hemmeter, Ault, & Schuster, 2001, p. 445), and to children of all socioeconomic backgrounds (Burts, Hart, Charlesworth, Dewolf, Ray, Manuel, & Fleege, 1993). As children grow, however, they face different demands between preschool and early elementary school (Buchanan, Burts, Bidner, White, & Charlesworth 1998; Maxwell et al., 2001). Moreover, as old theories are renegotiated and new theories are introduced, deeming what is appropriate practice becomes a fluid endeavor.

Play and development are prominent in both curriculum and theory at the kindergarten level in Ontario and beyond (Frost et al., 2005; Moyles, 2005; Murphy, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Quebec Ministry of Education, 2001). The importance of DAP is also reiterated in the Ontario kindergarten curriculum: “to support children’s learning, the principal should ensure that the Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten program is based on research-informed, pedagogically sound, developmentally appropriate practices that support all children and their families” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 10).

### Play as an Element of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

When given freedom to select activities, children frequently choose play (Hofferth & Jankuniene, 2001). As there is no concrete definition of play, it can be described using different frameworks. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2010), play can include, but is not limited to: pretend play (where children take on alternative roles or create imaginary environments); socio-dramatic play (which can include storytelling or acting out tasks); and constructive play (which can include drawing, painting, and building). Play is developmentally appropriate and necessary for young children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Frost et al., 2005; Moyles, 1995; NAEYC, 2009). Briggs and Hansen (2012) suggest that “play – in its widest sense is appropriate for humans of *any* age” (p. 8). Play-based learning as a component of DAP is an important aspect in developing children’s language, cognition, self-regulation, and social skills (Bronson, 2000; Clawson, 2002; Davidson, 1998; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Monro, 2007; Duncan & Tarulli, 2003; Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Zigler, Singer, & Bishop-Josef, 2004). Research also indicates that play compliments and does not detract from academic learning (Bodrova, & Leong, 2001; Zigler et al., 2004). It has even been suggested that play is learning (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006).

### Relationship Between Teacher Beliefs and Practice

Research on the relationship between teacher beliefs and practices has consistently suggested that there is a link between teacher practices and beliefs (Charlesworth et al., 1991; Fehring, 1998; Martin et al., 1997; Smith & Shepard, 1988; Stipek et al., 1992). Rusher, McGrevin and

Lambiotte (1992) assert that the beliefs of school personnel almost fully control what takes place in the classroom. Teachers filter new information through their personal beliefs (Kagan, 1992), and their beliefs have been shown to predict “classroom practices even after controlling for the effects of grade and education” (Maxwell et al. 2001, p. 443).

While teacher beliefs have an effect on classroom practices as a whole, there appears to be a discrepancy between teacher beliefs and practices regarding DAP and play. Quance, Lehrer and Stathopoulos (2008) found an association between play activity and Grade 1 teachers’ ability to put their beliefs into practice. According to Haupt and Ostlund (1997), teachers are also influenced by parents, administrators, other teachers in upper grades, the school board, and district policies that may have views that are inconsistent with their own beliefs. Moreover, studies indicate that inclusion or exclusion of DAP is influenced by parental pressure (Buchanan et al., 1998; Murphy, 2006; Stipek & Byler, 1997), administrators (Buchanan et al., 1998; Murphy, 2006), policies which favor more structured basic-skills instruction rather than DAP (Buchanan et al., 1998; Stipek & Byler, 1997), and high teacher-student ratios (Buchanan et al., 1998; Murphy, 2006). Some teachers are pressured to emphasize basic skills more than they would like (Hitz & Wright, 1988). Moreover, Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) found that “in terms of student preparation pressure, teacher-directed kindergarten teachers were less likely to feel pressure, while child-centred teachers were more likely to feel pressure” (p. 71). While some teachers wish to carry out more DAP and play, they are unable to for various reasons, such as time, budget, and behavior management concerns (Quance et al., 2008).

### **Method**

The study reported here explored potential barriers that restrain Ontario Grade 1 teachers from carrying out play activities in their program. It follows a mixed-methods study by Quance et al. (2008), which explored DAP and barriers to play in Quebec Grade 1 classrooms. The researchers identified “four separate aspects of DAP... at the Grade One level: movement and control; product versus rewards; learning through play; and educational toys and manipulation” (Quance et al., 2008, p. 14), and found that a lack of time, space, budget, and materials limited teachers from carrying out more play activities. In the present study, the first phase of data collection involved a questionnaire while the second involved individual, structured interviews with six Ontario Grade 1 teachers; this paper reports on the interview data only.

### **Participants, Data Collection, and Instrument**

Initial recruitment was made via four Southwestern Ontario school boards, and the interview participants agreed to a follow-up interview upon completion of an initial questionnaire. All six interview participants were female Grade 1 teachers working in Southwestern Ontario elementary schools. All participants were interviewed by phone and provided their consent to be audio recorded. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes.

The interview questions (Appendix A) focused on: teachers’ own definitions of play in the context of schools, activities, and practices that use play in the classroom (e.g., Please tell me about specific activities that use play in your classroom.); personal feelings on play (e.g., For what age level and setting do you think play is appropriate for the classroom?); and factors that inhibit or contribute to the ability to implement play in the classroom (e.g., Are there factors which support you in implementing play in your program? Are there factors that challenge you in implementing play within your program?).

## Results

The interview data was coded using inductive analysis as described by Creswell (2012). After thorough and repeated readings of the qualitative data, two distinct variations of play occurring within the participants' classrooms emerged: teacher-led play and child-led play. These results fit within "collision with established ideologies about children's freedom, choice, and autonomy" (Wood, 2007, p. 311). Some educators may be more inclined to provide greater teacher-centered or child-centered learning experiences. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the participants included strictly teacher-led or child-led play activities in their classroom, but rather, their practices existed on a continuum.

### Teacher-Led Play Activities

Four out of six participants indicated that they included play activities in their classrooms where the teacher's role was to lead, and the student's role was to follow. Interestingly, the four teachers who primarily described their role as a leader of play activities did not believe their beliefs about play were represented in their classroom practices. Their role in the play activities conflicted with their belief that play should include some degree of student choice. Even though their students were able to carry out some play activities, most of their examples required a high degree of teacher control. The two main ways the four participants incorporated teacher-led play into their program were through educational play (play for the purpose of meeting specific curriculum expectations) and physical play (play being used to specifically meet the physical education curriculum expectations). Both of these types of play activities included heavy teacher involvement, with meeting curriculum expectations as the intended outcome.

Some participants incorporated game-like activities into math and literacy instruction. According to one participant, during some math periods, "we play adding and subtracting games, [and] measure things," while another teacher said that her students were "currently working on number pattern games." Other examples of educational play included songs and memory games. Physical play, meanwhile, occurred during daily physical activity or physical education periods. The Ontario Ministry of Education mandates that elementary school children receive at least 20 minutes of Quality Daily Physical Activity (QDPA). All participants described QDPA as the main example of physical play used in their practice. Despite the requirement, however, QDPA did not occur daily within all participants' programs. As one participant described, "If the weather is nice, I take the children out for 20-minute QDPA sessions and do structured team games or various circuit activities." Another teacher shared, "If the children are looking antsy, I try and incorporate some QDPA for a few minutes in the classroom."

### Child-Led Play Activities

Two out of the six participants indicated that most of the play activities that they incorporated were student-led play experiences. Participants incorporated student-led play through pretend play, authentic play, and free play. Pretend play occurs when children imagine and act out different roles, while authentic play is completely child-centered, requiring no commercial products and all the equipment for play (e.g., rocks, sticks, mud, snow) is found in natural environments (Hyvonen, 2011). In free play, children choose "what they want to do, how they want to do it and when to stop and try something else. Free play has no external goals set by adults and has no adult imposed curriculum" (Santer, Griffiths, & Goodall, 2007, p. xi). These

three types of play activities are characterized by a high degree of student choice and autonomy. Authentic play was incorporated by taking students outdoors. According to one participant, the class was taken to a local park:

[They] just [explored] natural environments. Many of my students do not get that opportunity at home. One day, we saw a hawk in the park, and the students stared in awe. They rarely get those interactions with nature. Another time, the students made a seesaw out of a fallen tree. But... it's a bit far, so we don't go there very often.

Other examples of authentic play included taking students out to the schoolyard to play in the snow and meeting students outside at the end of recess to extend outdoor time.

All six participants described giving their students time for free play. One teacher gave students “about 15 minutes of ‘free choice’ time in which they are able to choose from a variety of activities each day... students need this time to build their social and self-regulation skills.” Another teacher described free play activities which occurred “a few times each week. The students who have been on task are rewarded with first choice of their play activity.”

In contrast to the participants who carried out more teacher-led play activities, the two teachers who more frequently implemented child-led play activities believed that they were generally able to carry out their beliefs regarding play in their program. These two participants shared that play was an important tool in developing their students’ self-regulation and social skills. These feelings were identified in their personal definition of play. According to these teachers, “play is when children are engaging with other children, and learning to play together” and “play encourages students to decide what they want to do together, what to build and to imagine collaboratively.”

### **Factors Constraining Teachers’ Ability to Carry Out Play Activities**

All participants felt various factors limited their ability to carry out more play activities within their educational program. Pressure to meet curriculum expectations, the school environment, insufficient funding, lack of time, and inadequate professional development on how to integrate play were the described factors that teachers believed constrained their ability to carry out play activities. One participant explained, “I would do more play if I could ensure I could meet the curriculum expectations.” Another teacher stated that, “my teaching is impacted by having to meet so many curriculum expectations that you always feel behind... I would like to give the children more opportunity to play, but there is certainly pressure to meet those expectations and goals.” A third participant described, “there is too much of a leap from what they experienced in play-based kindergarten to the curriculum of Grade 1.”

In reference to the school environment as a barrier, one participant “wish[ed] there were more natural outdoor spaces. Our school is in an urban area so we do not have a lot of green space.” Another teacher stated, “If there was more space in between children this might make it easier, but there is not. They are so close together so they sometimes step on each other’s toys and fingers.” Another said, “I wish I could get rid of some of the tables. They take up way too much space and they are massive!” Still another teacher expressed the concern for space, stating that in her school board, every school received the same desks, chairs, cabinets, and supplies. This was to make things easier to replace if anything was broken. The participant noted that the

policy was reasonable if the goal is to reduce costs, yet it restricted their ability to modify learning environments to accommodate play activities.

Some teachers saw a lack of funding for additional staff or play items as a factor limiting their ability to carry out play activities. According to one, “It’s very hard because you don’t have that extra person in the room, like you did in kindergarten.” (Ontario kindergarten classrooms are taught by a kindergarten teacher and an early childhood educator working in partnership.) Another interviewee identified that “Money is always an issue. If I’m not paying for additional items, it’s hard to get them... There needs to be a limit with how many dollars you put into your classroom.” Furthermore, another teacher said, “If play was going to be used with greater frequency within the classroom, I would need a budget for more toys and activities for children... The toys that we do have, have been purchased using my own money.”

Some participants shared that a lack of time was a barrier preventing them from implementing more play activities. One teacher noted, “It depends on time – time to plan this, look at how to structure it and use it well. Time is at a premium.” Another stated, “There is so much that we need to go over in so little time. Things like creativity and empathy that can be developed through play are important.” This was reiterated by another participant, who shared, “I would like to have more opportunities for free play if I had more time.” Lastly, inadequate professional development was described as a factor that limited teachers’ ability to implement more play activities within their program. One participant “wish[ed] there was more professional development on how to integrate play into the curriculum” while another desired for “teachers [to have] opportunities to learn how to give children time to play and at the same time meet those important literacy and math expectations.”

### **Discussion**

A lack of time, insufficient funding, the school environment, inadequate professional development regarding play, and pressure to meet curriculum standards were the identified in this study as factors that limited teachers’ ability to carry out play in the Grade 1 classroom. Inadequate space to implement more play activities within the classroom has been previously noted in the literature. According to Patton and Mercer (1996), traditional Grade 1 classrooms “lack centers for construction, sand and water play, and sociodramatic/housekeeping play” (p. 1). A perceived lack of time has also been identified as a contributing factor to the scarcity of play in Grade 1 classrooms (Broström, 2005; Hartmann & Rollett, 1994; Patton & Mercer, 1996; Quance et al., 2008; Yeom, 1998). The breadth of material to cover in the Grade 1 curriculum may also explain the apparent lack of integration of play within the participants’ classrooms. According to Buchanan et al. (1998):

The focus in first-grade curriculum is on the basic reading and writing skills that pressure teachers to do more phonics activities, use more work-sheets, have children practice handwriting in a decontextualized manner, and to do [coloring] within the lines and cutting on lines in an effort to develop sound and symbol correspondence and small motor control. (p. 278)

Many participant responses reveal that teachers may not be ready to fully embrace a child-centered curriculum utilizing elements of play-based learning. The pressure to cover the extensive curriculum expectations and, as one participant explained, “prepare them for the task that lies ahead” might lead teachers to favor traditional teacher-directed instructional methods.



Giving up the control to students during play activities may be more difficult for teachers even if they believe in the importance of play. This is the essence of what has been described as the “play paradox” (Noss & Hoyles, 1992). It is difficult to both hold students accountable to meet curriculum standards and allow the same children the freedom to play. As Noss and Hoyles (1992) identify, the “play paradox” challenges educators to balance motivating activities with teacher-planned activities to maximize learning. Ainley, Pratt, and Hansen (2006) suggest that:

Play can facilitate learning and so there is a desire to incorporate play-like freedom into more formal school-based learning, even for older pupils. However, such a strategy transfers control over what is learned away from the teacher to the pupils themselves. This is unsatisfactory if the teacher has an agenda in which certain specific knowledge should be assimilated. (p. 23)

Alternatively, when children have opportunities to choose their play experiences, it can increase metacognition, self-regulation, and motivation (Whitebread, 2010). Teachers have an important role in providing students with choice as opposed to pressuring them to perform certain activities (Gurland & Grolnick, 2003). The results of this study indicate that additional professional development may be required, as was suggested by some participants, to cultivate teachers’ capacities and confidence to integrate play while also supporting student choice.

Recent research has revealed that there may be opportunities to incorporate curriculum expectations and student choice through guided play. According to Wiesburg, Kittredge, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Khlar (2015), “Guided play, by respecting children’s self-direction in an adult-initiated environment, allows for a strong curricular foundation with developmentally appropriate pedagogy” (p. 11-12). They concede, however, that more research is required to examine possibilities for guided play outside of preschools. For teachers in this study, it means that guided play may provide an opportunity to give students play experiences and some degree of freedom, while still addressing curriculum expectations.

### **Limitations**

The small sample size and timing of this study are both limitations. This research is not generalizable. Participants’ schools, principals, classes, funding, and even the provincial curriculum can change from year to year, meaning that their practices and factors constraining their ability to carry out play activities could change over time. Moreover, teachers’ beliefs may be subject to change depending on new experiences and shifts in thinking. There are also varying perspectives on what is play (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). As stated, play can take a variety of forms, and actions that one teacher identifies as play, may not be interpreted as play by another. For example, a few participants did not see time at math centers as play, while another was able to implement play-based math activities during center time. It is important then, to recognize the varying perspectives about the nature of play when interpreting results.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research about play in Grade 1 classrooms could identify teachers who successfully overcome obstacles to incorporating play. Examinations of how play is used in these classrooms could provide guidance for other practitioners. Analyses of effects following professional development sessions about play for primary teachers could provide further insights.

Opportunities for professional growth act as catalysts for school staff and teachers as they share new knowledge and influence others to adopt alternative teaching practices (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009). As Wiesburg and colleagues (2015) assert, more research is required to examine the possibilities of integrating curriculum and play through guided play.

### Conclusion

This research furthers understandings about the shift in pedagogy between kindergarten and Grade 1 (Glauert et al., 2007). It supports claims that the elementary grades are a difficult place not to only engage in early childhood education (Goldstein, 1997), but also to consistently apply DAP. Developmentally appropriate practices such as play need to be included with greater frequency in Ontario Grade 1 classrooms, and educators need to be given the tools and knowledge to empower children and integrate playful learning opportunities into their classroom practices. If the principles of play-based learning are to be successfully extended into the early primary years in Ontario, barriers preventing play must first be addressed.

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