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PLAY UNDER SIEGE:
A Historical Overview

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The Current Attack on Play

In recent years, children's play has come under serious attack. Many preschools and elementary schools have reduced or even eliminated playtime from their schedules (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Brandon, 2002; Johnson, 1998; Murlin, 2000). For example, in some places, dress-up areas are being removed from preschool classrooms and recess periods in elementary schools are being shortened or omitted. Play is being replaced by lessons targeting cognitive development and the content of standardized testing, especially in the area of literacy and reading (Brandon, 2002; Fromberg, 1990; Johnson, 1998). This policy change resulted partially from findings showing the poor academic performance of many American children, particularly in comparison to students from other nations (Elkind, 2001). The change also reflects an attempt to eliminate the well-documented gap in achievement between children from low socioeconomic backgrounds and minority families and those from higher income, nonminority backgrounds (Raver & Zigler, in press).

The policies of the George W. Bush administration did much to fuel the latest attack on play. The president spoke often about reforming education (including preschool education) with curricula focused on cognitive development, literacy, and “numeracy.” Mrs. Bush, a former librarian, met the tradition of holding White House conferences on children’s issues with the White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development—not child development nor actually the whole of cognitive development. The focus was on literacy, one cognitive skill out of many related to success in school. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, first passed in 1965, was renamed The No Child Left Behind Act when it was reauthorized in 2001.
The new law added the President's initiative that all children be able to read by third grade (Bush, 2003). The reading mandate and accompanying testing resulted in further emphasis on literacy training, particularly phonics, in the early elementary grades.

The spotlight on cognition also found its way into policies and proposals for preschool services, most notably Head Start. The Bush administration initially wanted to change Head Start from a comprehensive intervention to a literacy program (Raver & Zigler, in press; Steinberg, 2002; Strauss, 2003; Zigler, in press). This sort of change could be made only by changing the law governing Head Start—a time-consuming process. To move the program in the direction it wanted more quickly, the administration imposed new protocols on how the program should be run (decisions that are within its power). For example, training and technical assistance was diverted from its usual function of helping programs meet quality standards to training teachers in literacy instruction. A new reporting system was instituted that imposes standardized testing of Head Start preschoolers twice a year to assess their cognitive development (language, preliteracy, and pre-math skills). The results of the testing will be used to determine whether centers are performing adequately; one fear is that funding decisions may be based on children's test scores.

In 2003, Congress began work to reauthorize Head Start. The reauthorization process typically adjusts program details to keep budgets and services current. This time, however, Congress sought to redesign Head Start. Among other things, a version of a bill later passed in the House (H.R. 2210) removed language in the law relating to what has always been one focus of Head Start, social and emotional development. Most occurrences of these words were replaced with one word, "literacy." This version also stopped assessments of children's social and emotional functioning in ongoing national evaluations of Head Start (Schumacher, Greenberg, & Mezey, 2003). Instead, representatives wanted assessments of whether children met specified goals on preliteracy and pre-math tests. (These goals prevailed in the bill that eventually passed, although the obliteration of language pertaining to social and emotional competence and evaluations did not.)

Many experts vocally criticized these policy changes, arguing that the overemphasis on cognitive development and standardized testing was inappropriate (Steinberg, 2002; Strauss, 2003). Elkind (2001), in a piece titled, "Young Einsteins: Much Too Early," argued that young children learn best through direct interaction with the environment. Before a certain age, they simply are not capable of the level of reasoning necessary for formal instruction in reading and mathematics. Elkind believed this fact of development explained why the pioneers of early childhood education developed hands-on models of learning. A counterpoint by Whitehurst (2001) titled, "Young Einsteins: Much Too Late" appeared in the same journal issue. Whitehurst, who was subsequently appointed director of the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education by President Bush, claimed that "content-centered" approaches (i.e., academically oriented) are more likely to facilitate children's literacy learning. Raver and Zigler (in press) disagreed, criticizing the emphasis on cognitive development and standardized testing as being far too narrow and unsupported by scientific evidence on how children learn. They advocated for continuing attention to and assessment of children's social and emotional development, viewing this domain as synergistic with intellectual development. Without taking sides on whether emotion or cognition should be primary, more than 300 scholars signed a letter protesting the plan to carry out standardized testing in Head Start, questioning the validity of the proposed assessments (Raver & Zigler, in press). Related data have shown that many children are failing to meet the inappropriate demands placed on them. For example, the number of children held back in kindergarten in Chicago quadrupled from 1992 to 2001 (Brandon, 2002).

A Historical Perspective

A similar repudiation of play and overemphasis on cognitive skills occurred in the late 1950s when American attitudes toward education were seriously affected by the Russians' launching of Sputnik in 1957 (Zigler, 1984). This focus on cognitive skills had nothing to do with new knowledge about child development or education. The Russians' beating the United States into space was traumatic for Americans, representing a clear case of not "keeping up with the Joneskis" and injuring our pride. The Russians' feat was perceived by many as evidence that the more rigorous Soviet education system was more effective than ours. A return to the "3 Rs" was touted as the way to build American superiority in the global arena.

A prominent spokesperson for this point of view was not an eminent early childhood educator, but an admiral in the U.S. Navy. At this time in history, America was deep into the cold war, and the debate about schooling was seen as a matter of such national concern that it seemed appropriate for military leadership to get involved. A key participant was Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, who made the provocative assertion that young children in Russia were being trained in mathematics while America's young children were busy finger painting. The first author of this chapter (Zigler) was trying to forge a middle ground, writing and speaking of the need to nurture all aspects of early development, including the physical, socioemotional, and cognitive systems. He remembers vividly getting a call from Admiral Rickover, whom he had never met. The purpose of the call was to castigate Dr. Zigler for championing a whole child approach instead of encouraging attention to cognition. Thus, the battle line was clearly drawn between "academic" pursuits and play.

By the 1960s, the emphasis on cognition was accompanied by a facile and overstated environmentalism or "environmental mystique" (Zigler, 1970). This view held that minimal environmental interventions during the preschool years could yield dramatic increases in children's cognitive functioning. A book by Joseph McVicker Hunt, *Intelligence and Experience* (1961), was the bible of this point of view and had an immense effect. Hunt argued that the right environmental input could raise children's IQs by as much as 30 to 70 points. Given that IQ is among the most stable of all psychological measures, this promise was completely unrealistic. However, the environmental theory was glorified through the popular press, and bookstores filled
with titles such as “How to Give Your Child A Superior Mind.” Academic prescriptions for infants appeared, grounded in the argument that, if one started cognitive training early enough, remedial efforts would not be necessary later on. Play, which previously had been considered as the real work of children, became suspect. Instead, drill and exposure to educational gadgetry were seen as the activities worthy of children’s time and attention.

Another guiding principle of this environmental theory was that intervention programs were most effective if they are administered during a critical period—the earlier the better. This “critical period” concept was popularized in Benjamin Bloom’s (1964) book, Stability and Change in Human Characteristics. Bloom pointed out that IQ scores at age 4 years account for half of the variance in adult IQ scores. Bloom’s claim was misinterpreted by the popular media to mean that half of the child’s learning is over by age 4. This questionable argument further fueled the infatuation with cognitive development and compelled parents and educators to feverishly teach children as much as possible, as early as possible.

Even Head Start fell victim to the excessive focus on cognitive skills and naïve environmentalism (Zigler, 1970). From its inception in 1965, Head Start has been a comprehensive program, with components to support physical health, nutrition, social and emotional development, education, services for children’s families, and community and parental involvement. The founders of Head Start believed that preparing children who live in poverty for school requires meeting all of their needs, not just focusing on their academic skills. However, when researchers began to evaluate early intervention programs, they were drawn to assessments of cognitive functioning, particularly IQ test scores (Zigler & Trickett, 1978). Part of the reason was the zeitgeist of the time (e.g., the work of Hunt and Bloom).

Evaluators also became enthralled with the results: Relatively minor interventions—even 6 to 8 weeks of a preschool program—seemed to produce large increases in children’s IQs. These gains were soon found to be caused by improvements in motivation rather than cognitive functioning (Zigler & Butterfield, 1968). Yet findings such as these did not (and still do not) deter the use of IQ as a primary measure of Head Start’s effectiveness (Raver & Zigler, 1991; Zigler & Trickett, 1978). This practice is understandable in that measures of IQ were readily available, easy to administer and score, and deemed reliable and valid, whereas measures of socioemotional constructs were less developed. Also, IQ was a construct that policymakers and the public could easily understand, and it was known to be related to many other behaviors, particularly school performance.

Before long, however, researchers lost faith in IQ as a measure of Head Start’s success (Raver & Zigler, 1991). In 1969, the Westinghouse Report found that Head Start children failed to sustain their IQ advantage once they moved through elementary school. Investigators began to understand that Head Start children’s rapid IQ gains could be explained by motivational factors (e.g., less fear of the test and tester, more self-confidence), rather than by true improvement in cognitive ability (Zigler & Trickett, 1978). Experts also pointed out the numerous difficulties and biases in using IQ to evaluate comprehensive intervention programs (e.g., Zigler & Trickett, 1978).

In the early 1970s, the Office of Child Development (OCD; now the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families) articulated social competence as the overriding goal of Head Start and encouraged broader evaluations to measure more accurately the program’s effectiveness (Raver & Zigler, 1991). However, no accepted definition was available of social competence, much less established measures. Therefore, OCD funded the Measures Project in 1977, a multisite study to develop a battery of measures of the factors making up social competence, including but not limited to appropriate cognitive measures. Zigler and Trickett (1978) also suggested approaches to assessing social competence, arguing that measures of motivational and emotional variables, physical health and well-being, achievement, and formal cognitive ability must all be included.

Thus, by the late 1970s to early 1980s, the naïve cognitive-environmental view had largely been rejected, and a renewed appreciation of the whole child was becoming evident. The first author of this chapter (Zigler) wrote optimistically in 1984, “I am happy to report that the view of the child as only a cognitive system is now defunct” (Zigler, 1984, p. x). He cited as evidence the Head Start program, which had always addressed all aspects of the child’s development, despite the missteps in evaluation. Books by David Elkind, The Hurried Child (1981) and Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk (1987), argued that children were being pushed too hard, too early and were being driven to grow up quickly, especially with respect to intellectual tasks. Children were being rushed through childhood, Elkind stated, with little time allowed for being a child and experiencing age-appropriate activities, including play. He saw the consequences of this pressure as severe, ranging from stress to behavior problems and even to suicide. Elkind’s books were very popular and were important in moving both professionals and the general public toward a view that social and emotional development is a valuable part of child development and strongly affects intellectual growth.

However, the pendulum had already started to swing back in the opposite direction. In 1982, the Reagan administration cut most of the funding for the Measures Project, supporting only the site that was developing measures of cognitive functioning. In 1991, Raver and Zigler, in an article titled “Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back,” described how, during the Reagan and George H. W. Bush years, the Head Start administration was again focusing almost exclusively on cognitive measures to assess the program’s effectiveness. Further, the cognitive measurement system that emanated from the Measures Project (Head Start Measures Battery) was accompanied by a curriculum, which led to concerns about “teaching to the test.”

The tide began to shift yet again during the next decade (Zigler, 1994). For example, in 1995, the National Educational Goals Panel, a semigovernmental group composed of federal and state policymakers, officially defined school readiness as consisting of five dimensions: (a) physical well-being and motor development, (b) social and emotional development, (c) approaches to learning, (d) language development, and (e) cognition and general knowledge (Bredekamp, chapter 10, and Kagan & Lowenstein, chapter 5, of this volume; Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995). This definition emphasized that these dimensions are inextricably linked and
must be considered in their totality as indicators of school readiness. The 1998 reauthorization of Head Start explicitly stated that the goal of the program is “school readiness,” similarly defining readiness in terms of physical and mental health, social and emotional development, as well as parental involvement and pre-academic skills (Raver & Zigler, in press). Finally, a sensible middle ground seemed to have been reached, a consensus that learning is fostered by more than cognitive training. However, the tide turned again shortly thereafter, culminating in the recent attack on play and the prescribed focus on academics described early in this chapter. Once again, the emphasis on cognition was accompanied by a simplistic environmentalism, as when mothers were given Mozart CDs in the hospital, with the prescription to play them for their infants to increase their intelligence (Jones & Zigler, 2002).

The foregoing narrative demonstrates that the current disenchantment with play is a step backward in our nation’s history. It is also a clear illustration of the swinging pendulum that is often evident in American education, where prevailing political winds allow one extreme view to quickly rise to ascendency, only to be replaced by another view. Clearly, what is needed is a balanced approach that is based on knowledge derived from the best child development research and sound educational practice.

The Whole Child Approach

Adherents of the whole child approach do not devalue the importance of cognitive skills, including literacy. No reasonable person would argue against the merits of literacy. President George W. Bush’s initiative to ensure that every child in America will be a proficient reader is laudable. However, reading is only one aspect of cognitive development, and cognitive development is only one aspect of human development. Cognitive skills are very important, but they are so intertwined with the physical, social, and emotional systems that it is myopic, if not futile, to dwell on the intellect and exclude its partners.

Consider what goes into literacy. It involves mastery of the alphabet, phonemes, and other basic word skills, for certain. But a prerequisite to achieving literacy is good physical health. The child who is frequently absent from school because of illness or who has vision or hearing problems will have difficulty learning to read. So will children who suffer emotional problems such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. By the same token, a child who begins kindergarten knowing letters and sounds may be cognitively prepared, but if he or she does not understand how to listen, share, take turns, and get along with teachers and classmates, this lack of socialization will hinder further learning. To succeed in reading and at school, a child must receive appropriate education, of course, but he or she must also be physically and mentally healthy, have reasonable social skills, and have curiosity, confidence, and motivation to succeed. This broader view was endorsed in the authoritative book Neurons to Neighborhoods (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) in which the finest child development thinkers in the nation pointed out the importance of emotional and motivational factors in human development and learning.

The position that social and emotional factors are essential for cognitive development, including literacy, is not new. The founders of Head Start recognized the importance of these factors when they designed the program in 1965. Since that time, a body of research has demonstrated the importance of emotional and social factors for school readiness (Raver, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). For example, emotional self-regulation has been found to be an especially important component of learning (Raver & Zigler, 1991). Children must be able to focus their attention to the task at hand, filtering out distractions. They must be able to control their emotions when in the classroom, both during individual and group activities. They must be able to organize their behavior and listen to the teacher. All of these are essentially noncognitive factors that foster learning. Further, as discussed in this volume (see Bredekamp, chapter 10), this type of emotional self-regulation can be developed through play when children take turns, regulate one another’s behavior, and learn to cooperate. Play also provides opportunities for acquiring many cognitive skills. Through play, children learn vocabulary, concepts, a variety of abilities, self-confidence, motivation, and an awareness of the needs of others. These factors are just as important in learning to read as the ability to recognize letters or sounds.

Play and Development: Theory

The current attack on play contradicts sound developmental theory. The two preeminent theorists of cognitive development of the 20th century, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, both stressed the essential role of play in cognitive development.

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) was a Swiss psychologist who wrote on cognitive development for more than 50 years, beginning in the 1920s, although his work did not come to prominence in the United States until the 1960s and 1970s (Zigler & Finn-Stevenson, 1993). Piaget developed his theory of cognitive development after making extensive observations of his own three children, including their play. He argued that all knowledge comes from action and that children actively acquire knowledge through interacting with the physical environment. In particular, cognitive development occurs through the complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation. In assimilation, the child interprets the environment in terms of his or her present way of thinking. For example, a child using a box as if it were a car is assimilating the box to his or her mental concept of what a car is. Accommodation, in contrast, consists of the child changing and expanding on what he or she already knows. When the child encounters something in the environment that he or she does not understand, the child has to expand, through accommodation, his or her view of the
world and thereby restore equilibrium. Play, according to Piaget (1932), provides the child with a multitude of opportunities to interact with materials in the environment and construct his or her own knowledge about the world. Thus, play is one of the primary contexts of cognitive development.

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) was a Russian psychologist and theorist of cognitive development as well as a contemporary of Piaget. Like Piaget, Vygotsky’s work was not widely known in the United States until years later (in the 1980s). Vygotsky emphasized sociocultural influences on development, particularly how interactions with people—parents, teachers, peers—foster cognitive development. He argued that development occurs within the “zone of proximal development,” when tasks that are difficult for the child to learn alone can be mastered if the child is guided by someone who is skilled at the task. The zone of proximal development was conceptualized as having a lower limit (what the child can do alone) and an upper limit (what the child is capable of with guided instruction). In interacting with more skilled partners, the child can be taught the upper limit of the zone. Vygotsky (1978a, 1978b) claimed that play serves as the primary context for cognitive development: “Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development” (1978a, p. 138). In play, the child interacts with others (more skilled peers, teachers, parents) and can learn from them. Further, Vygotsky argued, when children use objects to represent other objects in play (e.g., using a block as a telephone), they inadvertently set the stage for abstract thought. Once the child has developed representational abilities through play, he or she is able to use these abilities to develop reading and writing. In addition, following the rules inherent in all play leads children to develop self-regulation, an ability important for success in the structured environment of the school classroom.

Play and Development: Empirical Research

Decades of empirical research clearly demonstrate the benefits of play for children’s cognitive, social, and physical development. Several of the chapters in this volume review this research, so only a very brief summary of major findings is presented here:

- **Cognitive development**—A body of research has demonstrated the beneficial effects of play for cognitive development, including language skills, problem solving, perspective taking, representational skills, memory, and creativity (e.g., Davidson, 1998; Newman, 1990; Russ, Robins, & Christiano, 1999; Singer, Singer, Plaskon, & Schweder, 2003).

- **Social development**—Play has been shown to contribute to the development of social skills such as turn taking, collaboration and following rules, empathy, self-regulation, impulse control, and motivation (e.g., Corsaro, 1988; Klugman & Smilansky, 1990; Kraftl & Berk, 1998).

- **Physical development**—Studies have found the positive effects of play on children’s physical development, including muscle development, coordination, and obesity prevention (Council on Physical Education for Children, 2001; Marcon, 2003).

Play and Development: Practice

Recognizing the vital importance of play for children’s development, experts have designed curricula using play to enhance cognitive development as well as teach pre-literacy and literacy skills (e.g., Bodrova & Leong, 2001, 2003; Bruce, 2001; Gronlund, 2001; Owocki, 1999; Sawyers & Rogers, 1988; Singer et al., 2003). For example, Bodrova and Leong’s (2001, 2003) “Tools of the Mind” preschool and kindergarten classrooms, based on Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development and the work of his student, Elkonin, use sociodramatic play to foster literacy. These classrooms contain dramatic play areas where children spend a substantial amount of time daily, and dramatic play permeates many classroom activities. Teachers support children’s play by helping them create imaginary situations, providing props and expanding possible play roles. Children, with the teacher’s assistance, develop written play plans, including the theme, the roles, and the rules that will govern the play. Preliminary evaluations of the Tools of the Mind curriculum support its effectiveness (Bodrova & Leong, 2001; Bodrova, Leong, Norford, & Paynter, 2003). In one study, children who spent 50 to 60 minutes of a 2 1/2-hour program engaging in supported sociodramatic play scored higher on literacy skills than did children in control classrooms (Bodrova & Leong, 2001). Thus, play, rather than detracting from academic learning, actually supported it.

Conclusion

The current volume offers unequivocal evidence for the critical importance of play for children’s development. Play has been found to contribute to development in several domains, including social, emotional, and, most relevant to this volume, cognitive development, including literacy. Thus, the current attack on play defies the evidence and appears to be misguided.

In response to the renewed focus on cognitive skills, many organizations have advocated for the vital importance of play for children’s development. For example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the leading organization of early childhood educators, has developed a position statement on “principles of child development and learning that inform developmentally appropriate practice.” The statement includes the item: “Play is an important vehicle for children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as a reflection of their develop-
References


