

Working play into early childhood education boosts students' learning experience

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Incorporating play into early childhood education can lead to better schoolwork among preschool and primary-level students, research by a pair of Penn State professors has shown, and instructing prospective teaching candidates to follow that path should be a constant.

Play has been an important part of teacher preparation in early [childhood education](#) because preschool and primary children learn through play and it is necessary for their development, according to Jim Johnson, professor of education in curriculum and instruction and program director for early childhood education in the College of Education.

Johnson and recent doctoral graduate Viana Wu presented "Teacher Education for Using Play with Children: What is Valued and Learned by Teacher Candidates" at a recent American Educational Research Association conference. Wu also conducted research in Taiwan.

Johnson also has done professional development nationally and internationally with Karen McChesney Johnson, a College of Education assistant professor of education.

"Teacher education must cultivate the minds, hearts and hands of new early childhood education practitioners so that their theories and practices will develop and be complex to match the realities they will face," Johnson said. "Research in this area must try to learn more about the what, the why and the how concerning teaching new teachers about the importance of play in education and how to use play in the

classroom."

That process is slow but steady. Johnson said only about a quarter of research universities such as Penn State have a course on play, about seven-eighths embed the topic in another [early childhood education](#) course, and about half of them are linked to field work.

"When the word play does not show up in college course listings, this does not mean it is not covered," Johnson said. "Often other related words appear such as project-based learning, activity-based, investigative engagements, exploratory learning and the like.

"Whatever the term, teachers need to know how to use play as a medium of learning and a context for healthy growth for young students."

A similar curriculum in Asia

According to newly enacted curriculum outlines in East Asia, Wu said, teachers are instructed to place a high value on children's fundamental nature, which includes children's potential to imagine and create.

"The outlines point out that children innately love to explore, operate and discover through play, and they learn how to interact with others and pick up cues in their surrounding environment through different play experiences," Wu said.

"The outlines suggest that [early childhood](#) teachers should pay significant attention to and take advantage of children's instinctual love of play, and provide limitless opportunities and environments for children to play and explore."

The word play can be multi-faceted. "The middle range of recreational play can be described as active and passive entertainment, and I think a

good line of demarcation is when kids become active participants – physically or mentally or socially – because this is when they are doing something meaningful and not merely being a passive recipient of scripted fun and titillation," Johnson said.

Johnson noted that play moderated by the teacher as educational play that is connected in some way to the aims of the curriculum is different from pure or everyday play kids do on their own. Teachers must be able to monitor when play strays off course, Johnson said, such as when kids no longer wish to engage because work is disguised as play or kids' play becomes too much driven by impulses and not enough from their brains' executive functions.

Teachers must be versatile

Veteran teachers also must be able to adapt to new philosophies concerning play, Johnson said, citing informal methods such as publications, conferences and workshops.

"An idea I recently heard from a teacher is that play pedagogy can occur in 10 seconds," Johnson said. "For example, when handing out materials a teacher can crack a joke and playfully set the objects out and reveal to the students her sense of humor."

Wu's research cited 2006 research by Yanjuan Yang who said coursework on play had a positive influence on pre-service teachers' knowledge development and established and strengthened their belief. Yang, a College of Education professor at Hunan Normal University in China, also suggested that asking pre-service teachers to recognize and reflect on their beliefs, views and theoretical orientations can be an effective instrument in their professional development.

The play philosophy is spreading, Johnson said, but he noted that it will

be challenging to convince some educational professionals who may think combining play and education is like mixing water and oil. "Play is a major occupation of childhood and essential to children's mental health and their overall development," Johnson said.

"Professional educators, ignore the children's play worlds at your risk. Even worse, you will be putting them at risk of not being able to reap the most out of their educational encounters. The opposite of play is not work; it is psychological depression. Play allows them to create their own learning experiences, and participants come to feel this, relish this and see the value in it."

Wu's research clearly points to the necessity of supportive courses and some professional learning opportunities provided by teacher education.

"In order to help teachers successfully implement children's play, it requires [teacher education](#) that provides a practical, beneficial and robust teacher preparation system that provides prospective teachers with a play-based curriculum and professional educators experienced in the field of children's [play](#), able to pass on their professional experiences to future [teachers](#)," Wu said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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