Play in Head Start Programmes: The Underutilised Resource

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Introduction

Head Start, the United States' largest, most well-known, and highly funded early compensatory and intervention programme, was designed to provide young children living in poverty with the services and education they need to succeed in school (Vinovskis, 2005). In the fifty-five years since its inception, researchers have studied Head Start's children and families extensively (Spodek & Saracho, 2003). However, most of the research has focused on how well children who attended Head Start have performed in school and beyond. Additionally, there has been a plethora of research examining curriculum models used, programmes developed, and pedagogies practiced to facilitate the best possible cognitive outcomes for Head Start participants (Bishop-Josef & Zigler, 2011). Yet, while a few studies mention children's indoor and outdoor play, the discussion of play as a focal point for children in Head Start settings is

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limited. This chapter will provide an overview of Head Start, present an analysis of research related to play in Head Start classrooms, and conclude with suggestions for ways to permeate Head Start settings, policies, and research with play.

Overview of Head Start

Head Start is actually a broad, comprehensive term for several services to families and young children: the original Head Start programme for preschool children; Early Head Start services to infants, toddlers, and pregnant women; services to families by American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) programmes; and services to families by Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programmes. Head Start takes the "whole child" approach by providing physical health, mental health, and social services to participants, in addition to early childhood education for children up to five years old. In 2018, Head Start programmes cumulatively served around one million children, and since its inception in 1965, has served over 36 million children (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), 2019). Typically, in the literature, the term "Head Start" includes the entire set of programmes when reporting demographics, while research mentioning play during the daily routine refers to preschool programmes for three- and four-year-olds. This chapter will focus on play in the Head Start preschool classroom unless otherwise noted.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines early childhood education as "high-quality early learning for all young children, birth through age eight" (NAEYC, 2020, retrieved online www.naeyc.org). Since words related to young children used by English speakers do not have the same meaning globally, it is of value to discuss American terms related to early childhood education. In the United States, the term preschool refers both to children who are three or four years old, and to an educational setting for threes and fours. Kindergarten is for children who are aged five. The primary grades to three are for children aged six, seven, and eight years, respectively. According to the Education Commission of the States (ECS), thirty-one states provide preschool, called "pre-k," a shortened version of the word

pre-kindergarten, for four-year-olds in public schools (Parker et al., 2018). Furthermore, a portion of those thirty-one states also provide pre-k for three-year-olds in the public school setting. In the United States (US), a public school is one provided through state and local funds for the education of the children in a community or district and is part of a system of free public education including elementary and secondary schools (Hess, 2004). While some federal dollars fund certain programmes, most of the burden to provide for the schools falls to state governments.

Interestingly, while sixty percent of the states provide pre-k settings for four-year-olds, parents are not required to send their children to public schools for pre-k. In fact, only seventeen states require children to attend kindergarten when they are five (Diffey, 2018). Statutes in each of the fifty states determine when children must, by law, attend school, making the defining of compulsory education in the US difficult. For example, in Oklahoma, children at age five must attend school (70 Okla. Stat.§ 10–105, amended by Laws 2010, SB 1715, c. 57, § 1, emerg. Eff. July 1, 2010). However, in Alaska, children are not required to attend school until they are seven (Alaska Stat. Ann. § 14.30.010). To further obfuscate the issue, although Head Start is federally funded, it is not considered public schooling, even though some pre-k classrooms are partially funded by Head Start dollars (CLKC, 2020).

Beginnings

In order to understand children's play and scholars' research in Head Start classrooms, it is informative to look at the beginnings of Head Start. Who should be responsible for the education and care of children, and who should pay for it, have been continuing questions, beginning in the early 1900s and remaining to the present (Beatty, 1995). Historically, several large events brought this question to the forefront of elected officials' thinking.

The Great Depression left many families without basic needs, and the states wanted Franklin D. Roosevelt's federal programmes to assist their citizens (Hogg, 2019). Additionally, a number of men drafted during both World Wars I and II were illiterate, giving cause for concern to a

government wanting a large pool of people ready for its armed forces (Sanchez, 2015). Another big shift in thinking occurred in 1957, when Soviet Russia launched the satellite Sputnik I (Wissehr et al., 2011). This incident deepened the nation's desire for better education for all children and ushered in the "Back to the Basics" (Brodinsky, 1977, p. 2) movement, aimed at making America's children prepared to compete with Russian children in mathematics and science. These events culminated in a paradigm shift in thinking the states needed the federal government's money and assistance in educating their youth, particularly youth who were at risk for failing (Mills, 1998).

Other concerns contributed to the mindset that the United States must change policies on a national level rather than allowing the states to determine how children should learn and when that learning should begin. Urban crime, juvenile delinquency, and poverty plagued large cities across the country, and states wanted Congress to address the needs of all the urban areas together, since large cities in various states had similar issues. Furthermore, advocates for civil rights for African Americans wanted federal laws to force the states to comply with policies to give equality to people of colour (Lawson, 2015).

The idea of civil rights policies attached to federal funds blossomed into campaign promises in the 1960 presidential campaign. John F. Kennedy's platform included federal intervention in providing aid to American education, and in 1962 his staff "recommended a bill that encompassed a broad social welfare approach to education" (Vinovskis, 2005, p. 22). Kennedy's idea was cut short when he was assassinated in November 1963, but Lyndon B. Johnson, who succeeded him in office, continued Kennedy's dream to help people living in poverty by creating programs for them. Launched in 1965 by Johnson as a part of his "War on Poverty" (Bitler & Karoly, 2015, p. 642), Head Start sprang from these social and educational concerns in a rapidly changing United States. The "War on Poverty" has possibly been the most enduring phrase from the large set of domestic policies spearheaded through the passage of the *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964* (Pub. L. 88–452) (Bitler & Karoly, 2015).

Unfortunately, this enduring phrase "War on Poverty" illuminates a problematic issue. When Head Start programs originated, their designers

saw children through a deficit model: children living in poverty were behind more privileged children when they entered the first grade and needed help catching up (Tanner & Tanner, 1973). Using the deficit model not only influenced practice in Head Start classrooms at the beginning, but also continues to shape current practices and policies for this programme (Barnett, 1998).

Catching up and Getting Ready

In 1960, only about half of the five-year-olds in the United States attended kindergarten and most of them were white boys (Dombkowski, 2001). Many public schools did not have a kindergarten, particularly schools in poorer areas (Beatty, 1995). Policymakers hoped that participating in a Head Start, piloted as a summer programme for children who had not attended kindergarten, would compensate for what low-income children had missed, compared to middle-class and upper-class children, prior to the first grade. This would give children at risk for failure the head start they needed. The summer-only programs lasted from 1965 to 1968, but then transitioned from summer to year-round programs from 1969 to 1972. These years were also a time when kindergarten for five-year-olds became commonplace in the public schools, helping Head Start change from getting children ready for first grade to getting them ready for kindergarten (Beatty & Zigler, 2012). The year-round programs currently continue for low-income preschool children, yet have never been fully funded. Consequently, there has never been a time in US history when all children who qualify for Head Start are able to attend (Johnson & Jackson, 2019).

The term *catch up* has been used throughout the fifty-five years of Head Start as a means to describe how important it is to help children acquire skills required for kindergarten, such as the alphabet and sounds the letters make, counting, colour identification, naming basic shapes and numeral recognition. School readiness is still a popular way to look at early education, and regrettably views play as a time filler and hindrance to learning (Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

Unfortunately, as *back to the basics*, *catching up* and *school readiness* became high-frequency educational jargon, these concepts helped create a misunderstanding of how children learn (Smith & Glass, 2019). This misunderstanding, that drilling basic skills should be the focus of a child's time in the preschool classroom, is counter to the belief that children learn through play and also continues to misinform (Bishop-Josef & Zigler, 2011; Vail, 2003).

Head Start's Role in the Early Childhood Education Community

Very young children playing, prior to going to the first grade and learning how to read, was projected by the media as being the ideal home life in the 1950s. Leaders in the Nursery School Movement, teachers of public school kindergartens and the Child Studies Movement had studied child development and practiced working with children a great deal by the launch of Head Start concerning early education and care (Beatty, 1995). Yet, there was a real disconnect between these groups and the committee appointed to implement Head Start. In fact, historically, Head Start professionals have had a vicarious position with policymakers who limit their communication with early childhood professionals (Beatty & Zigler, 2012). The original planning committee of fourteen had only four scholars with an early childhood or child development background. As a result, children's developmental needs were circumvented in the first set of instructions to the planning committee, which were to research whether intervention in the lives of high-risk young children would raise their IQ scores (Mills, 1998).

Although numerous Head Start studies in the late 1960s measured growth by Intelligence Quotient (IQ) scores (Smith & Bissell, 1970; Cicirelli et al., 1970; Kean, 1970), early childhood educators pointed to the fallacies of relying on this type of standardised testing of young children (Mills, 1998; Vinovskis, 2005). Yet looking back at how Head Start focused on cognitive gains in the beginning sheds light on why programmes continue a focus on cognitive gains (Ellsworth & Ames, 1998).

This emphasis creates a pressured environment for teachers and unknowingly controls how children spend their time in the programme (Vail, 2003).

Head Start's Role in a Global View of Children's Rights

Although Head Start was created by a special act in Congress to give marginalised children in the United States an equal opportunity, a similar document created by the United Nations to protect the rights of children worldwide has been opposed by Congress for adoption since its inception in 1989 (Blanchfield, 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC or Convention) crafted this international treaty that calls on countries to take "all appropriate measures to ensure that children's rights are protected—including the right to a name and nationality; freedom of speech and thought; access to healthcare and education; and freedom from exploitation, torture, and abuse" (Blanchfield, 2015, p. 1). During the Clinton Administration, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright signed the treaty on behalf of the United States, but it was never ratified into law. Congress has yet to ratify the treaty, which requires a two-thirds majority vote in the Senate to pass. Opponents of the UNCRC maintain that the US is already an international leader in advocating for children's rights and that supporting it could lead to unfounded political criticisms abroad. Furthermore, a number of Republican senators, claiming concerns about US sovereignty, have consistently opposed ratification (Attiyah, 2014).

Michael Farris, general counsel for Alliance Defending Freedom (2009), a conservative organisation, explained, "There are two core reasons that Americans should oppose ratification. First, the UNCRC would replace domestic law with international law, effectively overriding most American family statutes. Second, the substance of this treaty places government in a position to overrule parents' decisions in 'key areas affecting their children' (Alliance Defending Freedom, 2009, p. 26). Farris also maintained that American children are better off by our government relying on US constitutional decisions than international law (Attiyah, 2014).

A Watershed for Research

In addition to determining the effects of Head Start on IQ scores, the earliest policies crafted for Head Start also included a research component to determine the best approach to use with young children. This made Head Start a watershed for research in early education and care (Spodek & Saracho, 2003). Hubble (1983) reported a collection of 1400 research documents related to Head Start, including a group of longitudinal studies of the effects of Head Start participation on later school success. A literature review of most of the first fifteen years of Head Start research included studies related not only to cognitive development and the raising of IQs, but also to the impact of Head Start on participants' social and emotional development, health, families, and communities (Deming, 2009). All revealed a scarcity of the mention of play. The studies that addressed the impact of Head Start on the emotional and social development of children investigated their development of positive self-concept, curiosity, motivation, self-control, and emotional maturity. Other socio-emotional studies examined child-to-child and child-to-adult interaction, and the effects of Head Start on those relationships (Hubble, 1983). While surveying this area of study, one would expect to find numerous observations of play, scales developed to assess various types of play, and so on. However, only one study mentioned play in a comparison of two curriculum models in Head Start settings where an observational instrument to document free play was standardised (Feeney, 1972). Unfortunately, the *Free Play Observation Instrument* was not widely used and is now unavailable.

Mentzer (1968), who conducted a survey of first-grade teachers with former Head Start attendees in their classrooms, found the former Head Start children were "ready for classroom activities" and had a "willingness to accept discipline" (p. 284). Classroom activities and materials self-reported by the teachers included paper and pencil tasks and looking at books.

Bergen (1998) wrote of the hiatus that existed during 1940–1970 related to play research throughout the field, and the literature review of Head Start research during that time period confirmed Bergen's

statement. Research after 1980 mentioned play more frequently, including in the Head Start literature. Interestingly, Bergen and Honig also authored a booklet for Head Start in the *Basic Educational Skills Project* called *Getting Involved: Your Child and Play* (as cited in Chafel, 1982). This project was subtitled "A Head Start Initiative in Collaboration with Elementary Schools," and was designed for parent education. The Head Start Bureau explained the initiative on the front inside cover:

> Children are natural learners—each one unique, developing in his or her own way. Children learn at their own rate, and in many ways—by doing, playing, trying out and initiating. They learn best when an activity is relaxed and a pleasant experience for them, their parents, and others in the family. The *Getting Involved* series is designed for parents, teachers, and other professionals in Head Start and the elementary schools. It provides ideas for helping children acquire developmentally appropriate based educational skills at home and in school. (Bergen & Honig, 1981, p. i)

The introduction to the booklet includes a definition of play and states, "This booklet is about how children develop and use play skills, and how you can help them do so" (p. 3). These suggestions are for parents, and while they indicate Head Start's view about play, the suggestions are about children's play with their families at home rather than in the preschool setting.

Research Regarding Play in Head Start 1980–1999

Several interesting studies regarding play occurred in Head Start classrooms during the 1980s and 1990s. These pieces of research focused on play in ways that inform the field in two ways: how play affects children and how teachers interact with children during play.

Research into what components need to be present in the classroom to best meet the needs of homeless children lists "a stable, predictable classroom environment" (Koblinsky & Anderson, 1993, p. 21) as a crucial requirement for helping children adjust. They further discuss the

importance of "keeping play areas, routines, and transitions activities consistent, the classroom design and curriculum should also satisfy homeless children's need for quiet space, private space, personal possessions, outdoor activity, and opportunities for emotional expression" (p. 22). This distinction shows giving Head Start children time to play is essential.

Weinberger and Starkey (1994) researched African American four-year-old boys engaged in pretend play to answer this question: Do children who are considered at risk for school failure engage in pretend play, and if so, how much do they play? In what type of pretend play are they involved? The researchers videotaped naturalistic play in the housekeeping and block areas in the Head Start classroom as well as outdoors. They found the children in the study did engage in pretend play that was considered high in quality (i.e., objects used, number of participants) but low in quantity (i.e., number and duration of play episodes). The authors stated, "The strength in this study lies in its in-depth investigation of pretense in this currently understudied segment of the population. Considering the limitations of this study, the findings are of relevance" (p. 341). They also called for further research in classroom design and how much time is scheduled for free play, noting that these variables can directly affect the amount and complexity of play in which the children engage.

Another investigation was conducted to assess the construct validity of the *Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale* (PIPPS Fantuzzo et al., 1998), a teacher-rating instrument of interactive play behaviours of preschool children. Observations using the PIPPS were collected on 523 urban African American Head Start children. The PIPPS scales were confirmed supporting the following constructs of peer play: Play Interaction, Play Disruption, and Play Disconnection. Scale validity was established using indicators of social competence including teacher reports, peer reports, and direct play observation data (Fantuzzo et al., 1998). Children who received high interactive play ratings also obtained high social skill ratings from teachers and were well liked by peers and engaged during play sessions. Children who were disruptive in play received ratings of low self-control and were more likely to be engaged in solitary play. Disconnection in play was associated with low acceptability by peers and lack of involvement in play sessions. The researchers then considered the

practical use of the PIPPS and further study of developmentally appropriate social competencies for African American Head Start children (Fantuzzo et al., 1998).

Also researching teacher behaviours related to children's play, Kontos (1999) studied the way teachers talked to children during free play in 22 Head Start classrooms in two midwestern Head Start programmes. The children and teachers were audiotaped during free play. After transcribing and coding the audiotapes, results revealed that teachers were most often in the role of play enhancer, playmate, and stage manager. Their talk focused most often on statements or questions supporting play with objects and practical assistance. Furthermore, teachers exhibiting different patterns of involvement in roles and activity settings differed in how they talked to children.

While other research regarding Head Start was published in the last two decades of the twentieth century, many of this was similar to research in the programme's beginning. The focus continued to be on specific curriculum models, with additional research centred on literacy, children with disabilities, and English language learners. To encourage this skill-based focus, Bustamante, in writing about the Head Start environment, stated, "In a society increasingly focused on high-stakes testing, we must not lose sight of the importance of domain-general skills that can help children achieve school and life success" (Bustamante & Hindman, 2019, p. 35).

One argument Bishop-Josef and Zigler (2011) made concerning the amount of play in Head Start was that if the centre adopted a curriculum model including play, then the children were playing. However, there have been several studies regarding Head Start teachers' fidelity in adhering to the curriculum exactly as it is designed. Sanford-DeRousie and Bierman (2012) studied how closely teachers followed a purchased canned curriculum, in which everything they were to do and say was completely spelled out for them, and how willing the teachers were to sustain a curriculum after a pilot when the researchers had left. Teacher responses suggested efforts to promote sustainability of a curriculum were best targeted at reducing competing demands, rather than simply highlighting the benefits of the new curriculum. Over time, the parts of the curriculum model the teachers liked and could do easily remained,

while aspects that required additional teachers' tasks faded. Therefore, adopting a curriculum model that includes play does not solve the issue of ensuring that children engage in play.

Current Research

Similar to Kontos' research (1999), Gest et al. (2006) studied distinctive patterns of teacher talk during free play, mealtime, and book reading in Head Start classrooms. In this research, the scholars observed teacher–child interactions in those three times of the daily schedule and noted "instances of pretend talk, decontextualised talk, and rated the richness and sensitivity-responsiveness of the teacher's talk" (p. 293). Interestingly, as the authors were discussing the methodology, they made this observation: "Both teachers remained in the classroom during free play and were expected according to program guidelines to facilitate children's play during free play … whether a teacher engaged with children during free play appeared to depend more on teacher initiative than on programme policies or assigned roles" (p. 300). Findings indicated 65% of the teachers observed did not engage in any pretend talk in the free play setting. A conclusion the researchers drew from the data analysis was "there is considerable room for intervention and improvement in teachers' use of pretend talk during free play" (p. 310).

A study of activity settings and daily routines in preschool classrooms determined there are quite diverse experiences in Head Start settings for low-income children (Fuligni et al., 2012). Regardless of the curriculum model chosen by the programme, the teacher's structuring of the daily routines was more of a determinant in how much playtime would be allocated during the day. Further research is needed to illuminate how Head Start teachers structure their day, as well as how they explain the reasons behind their particular temporal environment. Another research question is how much time is used with daily routines, such as tooth-brushing, and whether play is used as simply a time filler for children who finish with daily routines while waiting for other children, Do Head Start teachers view play as a valuable experience in its own right? Certainly, after reading the research discussed here, it is clear that findings of large

amounts of playtime at one location are not generalisable to the nationwide Head Start programme. Play has a prominent place in the written Head Start curriculum (Bishop-Josef & Zigler, 2011), but further research is needed to determine the amount and types of play existing across the nation in various Head Start programs. While this would be a daunting undertaking, we will not know how much children actually engage in play without further research.

Play as an Underutilised Resource

Edward Zigler, often called the 'Father of Head Start', defended the programme as being a place where children are encouraged to play (Perkins-Gough, 2007). He noted the original Head Start oversight committee, of which he was a member, was concerned with children's play during the day at the Head Start preschool. He further stated that play is a part of the child's day when they come to Head Start. Yet, in an earlier publication, Zigler referred to play as the "untapped resource in Head Start settings" (Finn-Stevenson & Zigler, 1999, p. 4). Many others have advocated for Head Start, realising that with the number of types of care the teachers address each day, it is difficult to manage all of their requirements and let the children play for extended periods. Bergen (1998) suggested the development of a research replication/collaboration network that would bring together university researchers of varying levels of experience, graduate students and early childhood practitioners as a way in which play could be further infused into early childhood research, and including Head Start in this network could certainly add to the richness of what we know.

Bergen (1998) also recommended Head Start teachers be involved in the study of play by using action research. This would not only add to the knowledge base of the field but would also empower them to speak up for play within their contexts. It would also enable Head Start teachers to engage in what several theorists (Roopnarine & Johnson, 1984) have called the highest form of play: research on play while they play with the children in their care.

Supporting a Stronger Emergence of Play in Head Start

This chapter has provided a brief overview of Head Start, from its beginnings to its present place in American society. While it has certainly not been perfect, Head Start has made a lasting impact on millions of children's lives for good (Mills, 1998). Along with an overview of its history, within the societal and historical contexts of rapid change in the mid-1900s United States, this summary has attempted to contextualise Head Start within the early childhood education field domestically and globally. An analysis of research related to play in Head Start classrooms determined a great need for using the Head Start setting throughout the country for future play research. Certainly, the suggestion of encouraging Head Start teachers to engage in action research would illuminate the role of play in Head Start settings. It may also bring play to the forefront of the consciousness of all those involved in Head Start: teachers, families, researchers, and policymakers (Barnett, 2010). There are several resources for Head Start teachers currently available that encourage them to use indoor and outdoor play (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, 2020). Having these materials available helps to validate the high value of play in the classroom setting and also adds play to the discourse of Head Start teachers. Further advocating for and support of the Head Start teachers will help to permeate the use of play throughout Head Start settings on the micro level. Promoting play in preschool classrooms to policymakers and elected officials, making certain to mention Head Start and its need for inclusion of play, will help to permeate the use of play throughout Head Start settings on the macro level. These strategies, combined with more research, can address the need for play to be at the forefront of discussions involving children enrolled in Head Start. Finally, specific professional development for teachers to assist them in planning for and implementing play will help to promote Head Start as a model for incorporating play in the lives of its children.

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