

Blurring the Lines of Play and Work to Create Blended Classroom Learning Experiences

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Researchers exploring children's perceptions of play in a prekindergarten and a K/1 classroom found a new category of classroom activities that combined elements of play and work. These blended learning activities were characterized by blurred lines between play and work, shared control of classroom activities, and spontaneity present in the learning experiences.

KEY WORDS: play; work; blended activities; constructivist learning environment; interviewing children.

INTRODUCTION

Mike, a K/1 teacher, is showing his classroom learning environment to a prospective parent and child. He points out Charles and Sharde building a castle that they can play inside. Next, he passes the writing center where Margaret shares a poem called, "Mud, Mud, Glorious Mud." Daniel and Patricia are arguing about who gets to change the gerbil's bedding and Mike takes a minute to help them problem solve. Three children suddenly run through the science station laughing and chasing one another.

How will Mike explain to the parent his curriculum and his philosophy about how children learn best? Will he talk about the role of play and work in children's educational lives? How will the parent respond?

This article describes a study of perceptions of play in which a new view of learning emerged, blending characteristics of play and work while taking into account adults' and children's perspectives. It provides evidence that thinking about play and work as separate activities is counterproductive to best practices in a constructivist classroom. Teachers and children in a prekindergarten

and a kindergarten/first grade (K/1) classroom were observed and individually interviewed about their perceptions of play. The study's findings exhibit three characteristics of the blended learning experiences. The article concludes with a discussion of the educational benefits of blurring the lines between play and work to construct a pattern of playful learning within the early childhood classroom setting.

Perceptions of Play and Work

Researchers exploring perceptions of play typically investigate perceptions of work as well, in order to provide a contrast. Several important issues regarding perceptions of play and perceptions of work have emerged from these studies. For example, children's perceptions and those of adults are not often aligned. Children's ability to differentiate between the terms play and work varies as well, often with age. Although study participants can label some activities as either play or work, other activities are not easily categorized this way. This section describes relevant studies on perceptions of play and work.

Bergen (1988) presented a continuum of activities from play at one end to work at the other. For each type of play or work activity, a specific kind of learning was identified. The first two types of play, free play and guided play, both contained the attribute of child choice, often referred to as voluntary (Ceglowski, 1997).

King (1979) studied perceptions of play in four middle-class kindergartens in the Midwest and New

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England. The children in King's study identified the ability to choose and direct the activity as key in determining if it was play. Children did not differentiate activities as play or work according to pleasure derived from the activity. Children in the study labeled the same activities sometimes as work and sometimes as play, depending upon the context. Fein (1985) conducted a study in which 28 children, ages 5 to 9 years old from 13 different classrooms, were interviewed about work and play activities. A consistent finding was their ability to identify the obligatory nature of work as a defining characteristic. Younger children in the study referred to play as fun whereas the older children mentioned fun as present in some work activities as well.

An ethnographic study of a full-day kindergarten in a low-income neighborhood found that the kindergartners' perceptions of play were very broad (Cooney, 1995). They tended to label all their classroom activities as play and had trouble differentiating play activities from work activities. The teacher's definition of play seemed aligned with King's (1979) findings on middle-class kindergartners' key attributes of voluntary and child directed. However, the children were unable to choose and direct their own play activities due to their lack of social skills within a school setting (Cooney, Hutchison, & Costigan, 1996).

Wing (1995) studied kindergarten and first/second graders' perceptions of play in a suburban primary school. Wing found that teachers attempted to make work seem "play like," but the children recognized this as disguising work. For these children, child choice and child direction were necessary for an activity to be labeled as play. In addition, the first and second graders identified an in-between category in their perceptions of work and play referred to as "playing and working all smushed together." The notion of the line between work and play being "blurry" was echoed by Perlmutter and Burrell (1995) who studied perceptions of play in a K-3 multiage classroom in rural North Carolina. They concluded that a busy and exciting classroom environment encouraged activities that children might define as either work or play.

Interviews with children ages 4 to 6 in a Penn State Study (Johnson, 1997) seemed to reveal "confusion or non-acceptance over using the labels work and play" (p. 8). When pressed, the children sometimes made distinctions about different parts of an activity, labeling the process of construction or the construction itself as work and the subsequent use of the construction as play. Johnson concluded that perceptions of play and work were influenced by the educational program and its philosophy. He speculated that children who described

activities as both play and work were more likely to be enrolled in programs that valued the children's input concerning curricular events and activities.

DeVries (1997) created four composite pictures of how play could be interpreted in four different educational programs. Even though all four composites incorporated a learning center approach into their programs, their use of materials and situations and their sociomoral atmospheres reflected differing philosophies about play. Classroom A considered play as "peripheral to learning" and Classroom B used play to "disguise work." Classroom C was characterized by "low level play." Classroom D valued play as an opportunity for optimal education, was constructivist in philosophy, and encouraged "high level play." DeVries concluded that the word "play" was problematic and that a new word was needed to describe high-level play within the classroom setting.

The literature on perceptions of play and work reflects a range of findings about how the two are differentiated by children and adults. Although there seems to be some consistency across studies that who chooses and who directs the activity (child or teacher) determines whether it is considered work or play, other questions arise. The notion that there are some activities, in certain contexts, that defy being labeled as work or play, but rather fall into a blended category, was a major finding in the present study.

METHODS

A prekindergarten and a combination K/1 classroom in a university laboratory school were sites for the yearlong study. Classroom observations and interviews with the children and their teachers were the methods used to gather qualitative data on perceptions of classroom activities. The data were analyzed by coding the observation field notes and interview transcriptions according to emergent themes.

Prekindergarten Program

Fifteen children, ages 3 to 5, were enrolled in the prekindergarten program. There were 7 girls and 8 boys of African American or Caucasian ethnicity. Their teacher, Carol, a Caucasian woman with 20 years of teaching experience, was a certified Montessori teacher, had a Master's degree in Early Childhood Special Education, and was studying the Reggio Emilia approach. Carol's apprentice teacher, Jamee, was a college junior majoring in elementary and early childhood education. The prekindergarten program ran 5 mornings a week. The classroom layout contained learning centers that included play areas corresponding to the emergent

curriculum projects chosen by the teacher and children. At the time of the study, a boat center and a bakery center were set up in response to the two concurrent interests of the group.

Kindergarten/First Grade Program

The K/1 classroom had 18 enrolled children, ages 5 to 7, with 9 girls and 9 boys. Seventeen of the children were Caucasian and 1 child was Asian. Annette, their teacher, had 17 years of teaching experience with a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education and a Master's Degree in Curriculum & Instruction. She was a member of a faculty team that taught in-service teachers a constructivist approach to teaching science concepts to children. Annette's student teacher, Jill, was completing her residency semester in elementary education. Annette's classroom was set up with learning centers and her curriculum was based on a thematic approach. Themes at the beginning of the year were teacher-chosen and then progressed to being chosen together by teachers and children. Learning centers at the time of the study included a dramatic play area set up as a doctor's office with real-life props available for exploration. The Human Body was the current theme for the all-day program.

Participant Observation

Four sessions of each program were observed and documented using expanded field notes. Photos of various classroom activities were taken, especially in the dramatic play areas. The participant observer was familiar with the children and the teacher as a result of doing early childhood practica in the two classrooms. The purpose of the observations was to document the learning activities taking place in the classrooms and to record the children's and the teacher's engagement in the activities. The observations, completed prior to the interviews, made it possible for the researcher to conduct interviews with the children and teachers from an informed perspective.

Interviews

Twelve children from the prekindergarten classroom and 12 children from K/1 were interviewed for a total of 24 interviews. The children who were not interviewed were absent on their designated day, did not return a signed parent consent form, or chose not to engage in an interview when the researcher extended the invitation. The children were interviewed individually by the researcher in a separate yet familiar room near their classroom. The interview format was semistructured consisting of five questions planned by the researchers. A



Fig. 1. Photo of Louisa and researcher during the interview.

relaxed and informal atmosphere was accomplished by providing drawing materials and by sitting, or lying, on the carpeted floor (see Fig. 1). The researchers' intent was to deliver the message to the children that there were no right answers necessary to please the adult interviewer (Hatch, 1990) and to follow guidelines set by Garbarino and Stott (1989):

Whenever possible, the adult interviewer should avoid controlling the behavior of the child, should allow for diversions from the subject at hand, and should embed questions in routines and activities already familiar to the child, or in words, drawings, and actions that the child introduces in the interview situation. (p. 189)

The two lead teachers and their assistant teachers were interviewed individually once near the end of the data collection phase of the study and again after the deeper data analysis. Every interview was audiotaped, with permission from the interviewee, and then transcribed by an experienced transcriber. The children's drawings were color copied and kept as artifact support for the interviews.

Data Analysis

The observational field notes, interview transcriptions, and children's drawings were analyzed by the three-member team including a faculty member, an undergraduate student researcher, and a doctoral student. Each team member read through the data several times to determine emergent codes for interpreting the data. At the end of several team meetings, the group decided upon six themes for the prekindergarten classroom and six for the K/1 classroom. Members then coded their data sets

and met again to review the data. A paper presentation was developed in which the themes were described (Gupton & Cooney, 1997). Upon deeper analysis, the team explored a major pattern related to the blurred lines between play and work activities. This pattern had three elements common to both prekindergarten and K/1 learning activities. It is the more in-depth analysis that is reported in this article.

Trustworthiness Measures

Triangulation of findings was accomplished by using multiple data methods and data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Observation, interviewing, and artifact collection provided data triangulation in the methods. By interviewing two teachers from each classroom and a total of 24 children, there were additional opportunities to triangulate the data. Debriefing, a measure taken by the researchers during the data collection process, involved weekly discussion about concerns, emergent findings, and logistical problems.

Member checks with the teachers were a third trustworthiness measure. During the data collection phase, the researchers discussed emergent findings with the teachers. When the draft of each article was completed, the lead teachers were asked to engage in formal member checks. They read both papers and reported that they found the findings fair from their perspectives.

RESULTS

The major finding of this study on perceptions of play was that the children and adults described some activities as both play and work. This section describes three elements characteristic of blended learning experiences: (a) blurred lines between play and work; (b) shared control of classroom activities and interactions; and (c) spontaneity present in learning experiences.

Blurred Lines Between Play and Work

Child and adult participants found it difficult to categorize their classroom learning activities as play or work. It was as if play and work, for many of the learning experiences, were blurred in their minds. Annette, the K/1 lead teacher, stated during her interview that the difference between play and work has "gotten very fuzzy over the years. It didn't used to be so fuzzy. And I'm glad that it's fuzzy now. I want it to be fuzzy, the difference between play and work." During her interview, Carol, the prekindergarten lead teacher, stated that all of the activities in her classroom were play. She felt that play was a "window into what the children are thinking and under-

stand." However, her Montessori background taught her that play is children's work. As a result, she referred to learning center time as "free work."

Children in both the prekindergarten and the K/1 classrooms had difficulty with the interview questions about play and work. When probed, the prekindergarten children contradicted the terms play and work, responded with "I don't know," or attempted a definition with a narrow view of work. The following interview with Eric shows his ambivalence about labeling an activity as work or play.

Do you work at school?
Yeah.
What do you do that's work?
Play.
Play is work?
No. I have to do..make boats.
Making boats is work?
Yeah.
What's playing at school?
Play stuff.

Eric's statement about having to make boats (in order to play with them) sheds light on the dilemma that meaningful activities often have a mix of voluntary and involuntary aspects. The prekindergarten children who clearly identified work activities tended to reflect a narrow view of work, which generally occurred at home as jobs or chores.

Do you work Aaron?
I work at my house. My mom and dad make me do, like vacuum or something.
You vacuum at your house? And that's work? What else do you do at home that's work?
I have to clean the windows and stuff.

The K/1 children tended to articulate the blurred lines between work and play by labeling an activity as both work and play, as kind-of-work, or by simply stating that they did not know whether it was work or play. Ashton introduced the idea that an activity normally thought of as work could be fun.

Sometimes the fun thing about it is cleaning up.
That's the fun part?
Sometimes.
So is cleaning up work or play?
Sometimes it's play and it's work too. Both.

The adults and the children in the two classrooms were reluctant to categorize activities as either work or play. This finding related to the fuzziness between the two terms was important. However, the researchers found the alignment between child and adult perspectives about this issue to be significant as well. The literature on perceptions of work and play tends to reflect a

difference in perspective between children and adults (Cooney, 1995; King, 1979; Wing, 1995).

Shared Control of Classroom Activities

Based on the observations of classroom activities and interactions, and the interview protocols, a pattern emerged of adults and children sharing control during many of the learning experiences. In the research studies on perceptions of play and work, the element of teacher initiation/control versus child initiation/control was a key variable (Ceglowski, 1997). However, the present study revealed a tendency for the children and teachers to share the control. This was true even in the interviews, considered by the children as another learning experience in which they had a voice. When the activity was jointly controlled by adults and children, an overlap occurred, bringing elements of play and work into the activity.

Prekindergarten program.

The prekindergarten program was based on an emergent curriculum approach in which children, their teachers, and some parents carried out investigations related to a topic of mutual interest (Jones & Nimmo, 1994; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). The projects that emerged out of experiences and dialog required groups of children to interact together with adults as they studied their chosen topic. Naturally occurring problems about how to proceed, what materials to use, and who



Fig. 2. The boat center in the prekindergarten classroom.

would do which tasks, were resolved through interactive dialog. Carol, the lead teacher, listened to and observed the children carefully in order to be responsive to their interests. She was the children's guide for an emergent curriculum.

During the time of the present study, the children were learning about boats and about bakeries. Some of the children constructed a boat for the dramatic play area in the classroom (Fig. 2). Each day they added more features to the boat center. Fishing emerged as a related interest and soon fishing poles were incorporated into the center. Shark play developed and books about sharks were made available in the library center. Shared control was present in many of the activities in the prekindergarten classroom.

Kindergarten/First Grade Program.

The K/1 classroom curriculum also contained the shared element in its choice of content as well as its interactions. The thematic approach allowed children to study theme-related concepts within a range of learning centers. For example, the drama center was set up as a doctor's office. Children explored the roles of patient, nurse, receptionist, and doctor. They learned to use medical instruments used in diagnosing illness. In the art center, the children engaged in a project to build their own body, with all its parts. Jake was enthralled with the human body parts and drew a picture of each individual body part that he had learned (Fig. 3). The K/1 daily ritual of class meetings also allowed for shared control of the curriculum. When it was time to select a new theme, Annette asked the children, "What would you like to study?" She responded to their interests by involving the K/1 children in theme selection. This element of shared control is linked to the blurred lines between work and play and connects with the next finding related to the element of spontaneity.

Spontaneity Present in Learning Experiences

Spontaneity is typically described as a characteristic of play (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983). This refers to the freedom felt during play to switch directions, change the rules to fit the emergent scenario, or to see things differently without constraints of how things "should" be. This playful element was present in the observations of the blended classroom learning activities and in the interview sessions for both age groups. Children felt free to shift directions while engaged in an activity. It frequently occurred when they experienced some disequilibrium. They quickly invented a way to resolve this in order to return to harmony. Sometimes the spontaneity was initi-

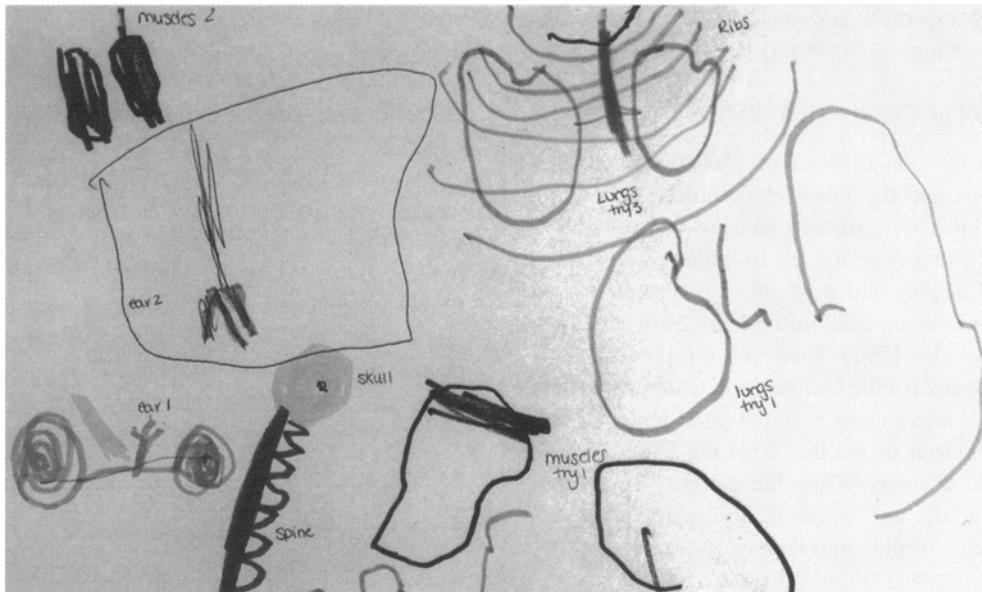


Fig. 3. Body parts drawn by Jake.

ated by the child alone and at other times it was inspired by a peer or one of the teachers.

Carol, the prekindergarten teacher, shared several anecdotes about spontaneity within the classroom during her interview. One of these stories was tied to the boat project and the children’s dramatic play.

I observed that the play around the boat would occasionally turn into shark play with children chasing each other round and round the boat and then jumping into the boat to escape the sharks. There was one little girl in the class with a whole lot of interpersonal skills who was [playing there] as the shark play was escalating. She was in the boat, got out of the boat, and went over to the kids who were sharks and said, “Sharks, it’s night and time for you to go into your caves now!” She led them across the room into the quiet book corner area and put them into their caves until morning. They settled down. About three times during the day she announced that it was time for the sharks to go back in their caves.

Carol was surprised and pleased that a preschool child was able to help her peers regulate their behavior within the play context. In fact, she found a solution that brought the disequilibrium back into harmony without breaking up the drama!

Children in the K/1 class also showed their spontaneity during learning activities. Annette shared a story about Clark’s ability to monitor his own comfort level while engaging in dramatic play in the doctor’s office center. He found a way to solve the problem of growing more and more uncomfortable when play-acting the patient.

Clark, not one to engage in drama activities wholeheartedly, is a patient. He hesitantly crawls up on the examining table. His fingers curl up around his mouth and chin as Dr. Mitch, his peer, asks, “What’s the matter?” Clark responds, “My leg hurts.” Dr. Mitch begins a thorough examination of his heart, eyes, and leg. Clark becomes increasingly uncomfortable and decides he’s had enough. He quickly jumps off the table and says on his way out of the office, “I feel better now.”

Annette felt that Clark demonstrated his ability to deal with what he was feeling by finding a way to spontaneously retreat from the activity. He came back into his comfort zone while staying on topic for the drama’s script.

In analyzing this finding, the researchers, as well as the lead teachers who engaged in the member checks, felt that the spontaneity present in both classrooms flourished because of the constructivist approach to teaching. Constructivists typically embrace activities that challenge children’s thinking so that they must construct more complex understandings about concepts (DeVries & Zan, 1994). Thus, disequilibrium is common along with a climate of problem solving. From a constructivist’s point of view, spontaneity, or playfulness, is an important element in any activity regardless of its label of work, play, or both work and play. The three characteristics of learning activities, described in this section, were discussed separately but interact together to create blended classroom learning experiences. Each element shares some common ground with the other elements and together they combine to impact learning by blending play and work.

CONCLUSIONS

In the introductory vignette, we wondered how the K/1 teacher would explain his curriculum and philosophy of education.

Mike tells the parent who has been visiting his classroom that his curriculum is carefully chosen to respond to the children's interests. He encourages children to take responsibility for their learning. He meets the curriculum goals set by the district while involving children in meaningful projects. When the parent asks if the children "just play" most of the day, Mike states that he believes play is important in the classroom and many of the classroom activities have a playful aspect. He gives the parent a handout about how a playful disposition will be one of the most important predictors of success for children growing up in the 21st Century.

This study found that activities blending elements of play and work within a constructivist classroom learning environment are characterized by blurred lines between play and work, shared control of classroom activities, and spontaneity. The ability to spontaneously shift directions requires a playful disposition in order to imagine other possibilities. A playful disposition is an attribute frequently identified in the literature as necessary for success for an unpredictable, quickly changing, and fast paced 21st Century. "Playfulness is a precious gift that will provide priceless opportunities for children to think, plan and enjoy life with all of the incipient changes and challenges offered by the 21st Century" (Boyer, 1997/1998, p. 95).

The notion of shared control of classroom activities is a cornerstone of the constructivist philosophy (DeVries and Zan, 1994). It is this shared control element within the classroom that demonstrates the phenomenon of blurred lines between play and work. Research cited in this article indicates that activities perceived as play tend to be characterized by child choice and child direction. Conversely, those activities perceived as work are teacher chosen and teacher directed. Thus, an activity that is jointly chosen and directed by child and teacher can be perceived as both play and work. The curriculum in a classroom where blended learning activities are present is coconstructed by the teacher(s) and children. Some activities in the curriculum, such as recess, are chosen and directed by the child. Other activities, such as chores, may be chosen and directed by the teacher. But many of the learning experiences are characterized by shared control between children and teacher.

In conclusion, the traditional approach to thinking

about classroom activities as being either play or work may limit possibilities for teaching and learning. There is evidence that a third possibility exists, that of blended learning activities. Further research is needed to explore the nature and impact of early childhood programs in which all three learning experiences occur.

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