
Book Reviews

A Mandate for Playful Learning in the Preschool: Presenting the Evidence

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, Laura E. Berk, and Dorothy G. Singer

New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Bibliography, index. 144 pp. \$19.95 paper. ISBN: 9780195382716

A Mandate for Playful Learning in the Preschool: Presenting the Evidence offers strong new ammunition desperately needed to halt the forces that devalue play. However, do not look for charming little vignettes that illustrate engaging play scenes. They are not here. Rather, the fact that this book gets right to the points that it so compellingly makes may, in itself, attract busy readers as well as give believers resource material for framing their own approaches.

In essence, *A Mandate for Playful Learning in the Preschool* “presents the scientific evidence in support of three points: (1) children need both unstructured free play and playful learning under the gentle guidance of adults to best prepare them for entrance into formal school, (2) academic and social development are so inextricably intertwined that the former must

not trump attention [to] the latter, and (3) learning and play are not incompatible—learning takes place best when children are engaged and enjoying themselves” (p. 3).

In covering these three areas, the book presents numerous big ideas, or themes, in a way that builds a cogent argument for the mandate for playful learning. These include evidence-based practice, integrated rather than dichotomous thinking, holistic conceptions of development, and embedding content in early learning, among others.

Evidence-based practice is the watchword today in professional circles. What interventions are advocated, taught, and actually put into practice must have the support of scientific research, not just a general contention that they sound sensible and might work. So the timely inclusion of evidence-based practice in the conception of this book might further invite play skeptics to view its pages—as well they should. Even closet postmodernists can be happy with these authors’ treatment of evidence-based practice, for they do suggest that the criteria for evidence “must come from a combination of sources, e.g., correlational, experimental, and intervention research” (p. 69), and “*the weight of the evidence* as a whole is

the most trustworthy basis for generating curricular policy and practice” (p. 70).

Rife in educational and human-service fields, dichotomous, “either-or” thinking undermines the quality of practice. Here it is exposed for the detractor it is from understanding the power of play. In fact, play seems to have been a particular victim of this kind of thinking. Play and work, for example, have been viewed as dichotomous or opposing concepts, with little recognition that work can be playful. A similar argument represents these authors, which is that play and learning have been made oppositional, with the result that a focus on academic activities has moved play aside, ignoring the evidence that play is an ideal medium for promoting children’s learning and all the abilities that comprise it.

Another dichotomous perception has been that real knowledge and content cannot be acquired through play. The authors reconcile this argument by showing that thematic and factual content can be learned through play more effectively than through didactic teaching that is ultimately ineffective with young children because they find it meaningless and unengaging. Sara Smilansky, whose seminal work in establishing the relationship between play and learning is used in this book, was one of the first to recognize that knowledge and content are indeed embedded in young children’s play. This contention was among her rationales for why play, particularly sociodramatic play as she defined the term, is ideal preparation for school.

The authors strongly advocate a holistic approach to child development in which cognition is connected and integrated with other developmental domains—

social, emotional, and physical. This is in line with contemporary concepts of development. Play encourages integrated development, supporting the acquisition of many dispositions and skills for academic learning—self-regulation, problem-solving ability, cooperation, and curiosity, to name just a few—upon entering school.

Here and there, in addition to the fully developed and focused material already described, the authors offer nuggets of wisdom. For example, in the introduction, Edward Zigler makes the point that as children grow, they move toward a mastery model of development, wanting to develop a sense of mastery and to become competent. This is a contention very much in tune with current knowledge of resilience. I am pleased that there is some mention of the elimination of recess in elementary schools, a practice that seems to be growing in direct proportion to the mounting body of empirical evidence that recess increases learning.

Playful Learning is a concept representing the culmination of the authors’ analysis. Just two words, but oh, what implications they have! Easily understood, they put away the false dichotomies forever (I hope), and can serve as an organizing mantra for justifying and initiating play-oriented pedagogy in early-childhood settings. The concept embraces the notions that academic content can be, and is, embedded in play activities, that adult guidance in these activities is appropriate, and that child-directed free play enables learning.

Seven basic and essentials principles concerning how children learn, combined with the recommendations at the end, targeted toward parents, teacher-educators,

and policy makers, comprise the final power punch of the book. They are multisystemic; that is, they propose mandates to multiple audiences and in the areas that support development. I am tempted to repeat or at least to summarize them here, but it is perhaps best that people read them for themselves and then take steps that, well, put them in play.

Ideally, the authors could have provided a bit more description of the process by which these highly synthesized premises were derived, although I fully agree with them. There is a twenty-two-page bibliography of source material written by many of today's top scholars and practitioners of play. On occasion these are specifically referred to in the text. However, because there are so many issues in play and child development that could benefit from whatever meta-analysis undergirded this study, I wish the authors had made its method more transparent, which would have been a major contribution in itself.

Certainly, I highly recommend this book. It articulates the beliefs of play specialists and scholars beautifully in an evidence-based context. Our task, after digesting it, is to make sure that it gets into the hands of those who really need to know and act on its premises—misled if well-meaning parents, educational policy makers, school administrators, and early-childhood caregivers and teachers. This work can play a big role in bringing them to their senses.

—Karen VanderVen, *University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA*

Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School

Edward Miller and Joan Almon

College Park, MD: Alliance for Childhood, 2009. Charts, graphs, endnotes. 71 pp. \$12.50 paper. ISBN: 9780982375105

The Alliance for Childhood is an international, nonprofit advocacy group composed of leaders in education, health, and other fields who care fervently about the well-being and the suffering of our kids today. This new publication seeks to create greater awareness and outcry concerning the demise of play in early-childhood education. The coauthors—both well-known educators, writers, and champions of children—present recent research and identify play culprits in schools and society, and then follow with important and informed suggestions to try to get us back on track to restoring play to its rightful place in our nation's kindergartens and other early-childhood educational settings.

The book's publication is timely for current efforts to spread the news beyond academic circles about the serious, unfortunate disconnection between the theory and research on play and policy and practices concerning play. Although considerable evidence supports the vital importance of play during the early years of childhood as well as throughout life, pernicious antiplay policies and practices exist in schools and elsewhere in society that hurt both children and adults in many ways. Significantly, this new report from the Alliance for Childhood reinforces recent efforts by the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). For example,