Discussion-Case Analysis for Facilitating Pre-Service Teachers' Exploration of Play in the Early Childhood Classroom

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Abstract

This study sought to examine the experience of early childhood pre-service teachers participating in facilitated research analysis with discussion-case application. Specifically, we were interested in the impact on teachers' knowledge of and attitude towards the role and value of play in the classroom. This study describes the qualitative phase of a sequential explanatory mixed method research project. Eight participants were interviewed after participating in an in-class activity of analyzing a piece of research on play and applying it to a hypothetical discussion-case in a small group Four key findings emerged from this study: participants viewed play as inextricably connected to learning; participants were committed to the incorporation of play in their future classrooms, many articulating a resolve to become agents of change; participants found that working in small collaborative groups to be advantageous, creating a community of practice; finally, participants found that the process of applying research to a discussion-case to be beneficial due to its feasibility. The findings from this study are encouraging because they demonstrate the potential of facilitated research analysis with discussion-case application as a strategy for fostering a deep understanding of the purpose and importance of play in the early-childhood classroom, as well as potentially cultivating a commitment to preserving play in the early childhood classroom. Discussion-cases may also serve as a tool for exploring other key concepts with prospective teachers. The findings have implications for teacher-educators as they prepare early childhood pre-service teachers.

Keywords: play, developmentally appropriate practice, pre-service teachers, discussion-case analysis

Despite persuasive research demonstrating the importance of play in early childhood education, there is a problematic trend in early childhood classrooms toward increased academics and high-stakes test preparation, with less opportunity for play (Brashier & Norris, 2008; Lynch, 2015; Nicolopoulou, 2011). Although research reveals that playful learning is appropriate *and* effective in the early childhood years, didactic instruction has supplanted play, even in the earliest

years of education, largely due to pressure to promote academic achievement (Reed, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2012). Play has been lost to teacher-directed instruction, notably in literacy and math, where free choice, imagination, and creativity are not prioritized (Miller & Almon, 2009). Because play is a vital component of effectual early childhood education programs (NAEYC, 2009), this tendency represents an alarming movement.

The purpose of this article is to describe the qualitative phase of a sequential explanatory mixed method study which sought to examine pre-service teachers' beliefs about play after a course-based activity involving the application of research to a realistic discussion-case. This research explored the technique of using a discussion-case as a potential strategy for assisting future-teachers develop their ability to understand and apply the research on play because although previous research has determined that play is a vital component of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education (Bergen, 2002; Branscombe, 1991; Copple & Bredekamp & 2009; Galeano, 2011; Goldhaber, 1994; Hall, 1991; Hamlin & Wisneski, 2012; Han, Moore, Vukelich, & Buell, 2010; Mielonen & Paterson, 2009; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Owocki, 1999; Pickett, 2005; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Sarama & Clements, 2009; Schrader, 1991; Siegler & Ramani, 2008), it continues to disappear from the classroom (Brashier & Norris, 2008; Elkind, 1987; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Lynch, 2015; Nicolopoulou, 2011; Reed et al., 2012). Investigating the impact of analyzing relevant research on play and applying this research to a realistic scenario about the disappearance of play in a kindergarten classroom was a valuable inquiry given the general trend towards didactic instruction, traditional academics, and testing in early childhood with less opportunity for play (Brashier & Norris, 2008; Lynch, 2015; Nicolopoulou, 2011).

This work emerged from the classroom experiences of the first author, a faculty member who teaches and supervises pre-service early-childhood student-teachers. Despite including play

literature in course readings and discussions, student-teachers often expressed an inability to apply ideas regarding the importance of play to their own teaching experiences. Because of this feedback, she thought that her students would benefit from opportunities to apply the research, in a practical fashion, not consistently available in their placements. The authors wished to examine a specific technique for building students' knowledge around this important topic of play. The findings will inform the practice of teacher educators as they prepare early childhood pre-service teachers.

Play and Children's Learning and Development

Play is a notoriously challenging concept to define because it is a "roomy subject, broad in human experience, rich and various over time and place" (Eberle, 2014, p. 214). In the context of school, play is typically referred to as playful learning, which is composed of both guided play and free play (Reed et al., 2012) and is best viewed as a continuum with guided play on one end and free play on the other (Miller & Almon, 2009). Playful learning does not eliminate academic instruction, but rather teaches content, at least in part, through play activities that encourage learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Play serves to enhance children's academic, social, and emotional skills, and engages and motivates children in a manner not achieved through didactic learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Play, especially when teachers scaffold and facilitate it, serves a significant role in developing children's cognitive and academic skills, including building literacy, math, and science skills (Bergen 2002; Bergen, 2009; Branscombe, 1991; Eberle, 2011; Galeano, 2011; Goldhaber, 1994; Hall, 1991; Hamlin & Wisneski, 2012; Han et al., 2010; Mielonen & Paterson, 2009; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Owocki, 1999; Pickett, 2005; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Sarama & Clements, 2009; Schrader, 1991; Siegler & Ramani, 2008). Play also serves an important role in developing skills important to working cooperatively with others in socially appropriate ways (Eberle, 2011; Gilliam, 2015). Additionally, play helps children develop

learning behaviors, executive functioning skills, working memory, problem-solving abilities, and flexibility of thought; these skills, while important on their own, also improve academic achievement (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munro, 2007; Ginsburg, 2007).

Guided play is an especially valuable approach to foster literacy in the early childhood classroom (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer, & Berk, 2010; Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff (2013). Guided play, where adults scaffold the learning, is ideal for developing language skills (Weisberg et al., 2013). Massey (2012) found that by connecting classroom reading with guided play, students experienced enhanced vocabulary and language skills. Similarly, Nicolopoulou, McDowell, and Brockmeyer (2006) discovered that children who acted out their stories– a playful and guided dramatic activity– created more complex written pieces. The language of children improves and expands through playful interactions with adults and peers (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Eyer, 2003; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). Research indicates that play fosters literacy skills in children by creating a setting where literacy skills and activities are promoted; by building a connection between oral and written expression; and by providing greater opportunities for teachers to teach literacy (Roskos & Christie, 2004).

Play also helps to develop children's mathematical and scientific thinking and skills (Bergen, 2009; Goldhaber, 1994; Hamlin & Wisneski, 2012; Sarama & Clements, 2009; Siegler & Ramani, 2008). Young children naturally incorporate a great deal of mathematics into their play (Ginsburg, Lee, & Boyd, 2008; Sarama & Clements, 2009; Seo & Ginsbug, 2004). With guided play, teachers can foster and extend these moments into opportunities to encourage the acquisition of mathematical understanding (Ginsburg et al., 2008). Sarama & Clements (2009) argued that because young children engage in play, which naturally incorporates mathematics, the teacher

should become skilled at using these natural opportunities to generate even more meaningful experiences.

The Disappearance of Play from Early Childhood Classrooms

Despite the research on the benefits of play and the most effective way for teachers to facilitate play, play is rapidly disappearing from early childhood classrooms (Brashier & Norris, 2008; Nicolopoulou, 2011). In many classrooms, learning through play is being replaced by didactic instruction, which can lead to short term gains that are neither as profound nor lasting as the learning gains achieved through playful learning (Alifieri, Brooks, Aldrich, & Tennenbaum, 2010; Almon & Miller, 2011). Over the last few decades, play and experiential learning are sacrificed by teacher-directed activities and didactic instruction, frequently sedentary in nature, and inappropriate testing (Miller & Almon, 2009). Early childhood teachers are commonly aware that this shift away from play is developmentally inappropriate, but they feel great pressure to bend to the trend (Brashier & Norris, 2008; Lynch, 2015; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006).

Pre-Service Teacher Preparation

The student-teaching experience and the accompanying seminar represent an opportunity for pre-service teachers to explore and connect theory, pedagogy, and practice. However, it is commonplace for teacher-candidates to witness limited guided play in their field experiences, even when the cooperating-teachers espouses play as a learning tool (Vera & Geneser, 2012). Play is considered a Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) in early childhood education (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). DAP is a research-based framework for teaching, which is intended to promote children's development and learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). DAP is a core component of the pedagogy in many teacher preparation programs, but without cooperating-teachers as models, pre-service teachers may benefit from an alternative opportunity to learn about

play. When deprived of models, pre-service teachers become challenged in achieving and managing successful play opportunities in their classrooms (Vera & Geneser, 2012).

This study allowed pre-service teachers to learn about playful pedagogy through the application of research to a realistic discussion-case. Because applying research to a discussion-case can serve as a detailed learning experience around play, participants may experience reduced apprehension about implementing guided play, despite the fact that their cooperating-teachers may not consistently model appropriate play pedagogy (Vera & Geneser, 2012).

Discussion-Cases

Discussion-cases provide a remote but genuine classroom experience (Goldblatt & Smith, 2005). Discussion-cases are scenarios and dilemmas, frequently based on authentic events and experiences, used to facilitate dialogue about a particular issue (Koc, 2012). They present an issue in detail, but not a solution, and therefore encourage dialogue among students and an opportunity to connect the scenarios and dilemmas to personal experience (Koc, 2012). Cases encourage readers to imagine themselves in the presented situation and vicariously experience a realistic classroom situation (Goldblatt & Smith, 2005). This study used discussion-case analysis as an occasion for exploring play because research indicates that such scenarios bridge the gap between theory, research, and practice (Broudy, 1990; Butler, Lee, & Tippins, 2006; Floyd & Bodur, 2005; Koc, 2012; Schrader et al., 2003; Sudzina & Kilbane, 1994).

Methods

This research describes the qualitative phase of a sequential explanatory mixed methods study that examined the impact and experience of participating in facilitated research analysis with discussion-case application on early childhood pre-service teachers 'knowledge of and attitude towards the role and value of play in the classroom. The mixed methods study used a variant of

the explanatory design– the participation selection model– where the quantitative information was used to identify and purposefully select the participants for the qualitative component of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

In the first phase, attitudinal data was collected before the treatment from a total of seventeen participants (Patton, 1991). Specifically, during the initial phase of this study, he Teacher Beliefs Scale (TBS) was administered in order to assess participants' beliefs about DAP in the early childhood classroom (Resnick, in preparation). The TBS, feelings about and comfort with play in the early childhood classroom, created by Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & Hernandex (1991) and updated by Charlesworth, Burts, Thomasson, Mosley, & Fleege (1993), was selected because its purpose is to determine early childhood teachers 'DAP and developmentally inappropriate (DIP) beliefs.

Quantitative survey data, once analyzed, was used to identify the participants for the qualitative interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to provide pre-service teachers with the strongest and weakest beliefs in DAP an opportunity to describe their feelings about and comfort with play in the early childhood classroom and to reflect upon the research analysis and discussion-case experience. By looking at the extreme edges of the DAP continuum, as determined by the quantitative data, the qualitative data revealed the views of those with the most extreme DAP philosophies. The use of open-ended interview questions allowed participants to explain themselves fully and to ask clarifying questions as needed, which led to a detailed understanding of participants 'perspectives. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do pre-service teachers describe the experience of reading research on play collaboratively and applying it to a discussion-case?

2. How do pre-service teachers describe the impact of facilitated research analysis with

discussion-case application on their views on the purpose of play in the early childhood classroom?

3. How do pre-service teachers describe the impact of facilitated research analysis with discussion-case application on their belief in the importance of play in the early childhood classroom?

Seventeen early childhood pre-service student-teachers enrolled in two different sections of Student-Teaching Seminar, during the Fall 2015 semester participated in the initial components of this study. Student-Teaching Seminar is a 15-week graduate and undergraduate seminar for pre-service early childhood teachers concurrently enrolled in full-time student teaching in a local public or private school setting. The seventeen participants completed the Teacher Belief Scale (TBS) (Charlesworth et al., 1993) in order to measure their beliefs in DAP, before participating in the analysis of a selected research article by Almon and Miller (2011), published by the Alliance for Childhood, which presents a summary of the research on play in early childhood classrooms and explains the recommendation for restoring play to early childhood education.

Intervention

Each pre-service student read an assigned portion of the article and then discussed the article with their small group. A variation of the jigsaw method (originally developed by Aronson, Blaney, Stephan, Sikes, & Snapp, 1978) was used because it has been shown to lead to effective educational outcomes, such as increased conceptual understanding, and efficient use of class time, in a variety of settings (Aronson et al., 1978; Halley, Heiserman, Felix, & Eshleman, 2013; Hänze & Berger, 2007; Perkins & Saris, 2001; Walker & Crogan, 1998). After students read the selected piece of research, we employed a discussion-case that was created for the purpose of this study. The discussion-case described a new kindergarten teacher's experience in a school where play is

not part of the curriculum and where attempts to embed and include play are discouraged. The discussion-case used in this study was designed to reflect some of the typical obstacles that teachers, and specifically kindergarten teachers, confront when wishing to implement and facilitate play-based opportunities in the classroom. Because research indicates that these pressures come from parents, administrators, and fellow teachers (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Lynch, 2015; Reed et al., 2012), the discussion-case involved all of these factors.

Students worked in small groups to answer discussion questions, applying the research to the discussion-case. The participants also received a researcher-created graphic organizer to individually record their solution to the discussion-case dilemma. Graphic organizers help students organize information from a text, such as a research article (Fisher, Frey, & Williams, 2002), and therefore provide a viable strategy for assisting college students with the reading and analyzing of research.

Participants

Eight participants were selected to participate in the qualitative phase of this study based on analysis of the data obtained from the TBS. The participants represented the four students with the highest DAP scores and the four students with the lowest DAP; all who indicated a willingness to be interviewed by checking a box on the TBS. The mean DAP and DIP scores for each participant is displayed in Table 1. Seven of the participants were undergraduate students, and one participant was a graduate student; all of the participants were female. The mean age of the participants was 28 years old.

Table 1 Mean DAP and DIP Responses by Participant Number, from Highest to Lowest Mean DAP

Participant Number	Mean DAP Score (Likert Response Category)	Mean DIP Score (Likert Response Category)

1	4.909 (Extremely Important)	3.214 (Fairly Important)
2	4.773 (Extremely Important)	2.714 (Fairly Important)
3	4.773 (Extremely Important)	2.071 (Not Very Important)
4	4.636 (Extremely Important)	2.643 (Fairly Important)
5	4.091 (Very Important)	3.357 (Fairly Important)
6	3.955 (Very Important)	2.571 (Fairly Important)
7	3.455 (Fairly Important)	1.643 (Not Very Important)
8	2.182 (Not Very Important)	3.571 (Very Important)

Data Collection

The qualitative phase of this study used interviewing as the method of exploration of student beliefs and experiences. The purpose of the interviews was to better understand the participants 'views on guided play and their perspectives on the experience of collaboratively analyzing research and applying it to a discussion-case. One semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant, lasting about 30 minutes. A semi-structured interview was ideal for this study because it required participants to think about an event retrospectively, and allowed us to understand participants 'perspectives, thoughts, and feelings (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). Questions were informed by a literature review of the relevant topics (Rubin & Rubin, 2005)– including teachers 'use of research, the research-practice gap, and the research on play in early childhood education– and by the collected graphic organizers, as they provide a foundation for discussion (Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006). Interviews took place at the participants ' convenience on the college campus. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and we took field notes during the interview, ensuring all data were gathered (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Participants were given the opportunity to look at their completed graphic organizer when

answering the interview questions.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed, word for word, after the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). These transcripts were used for coding, which took place in two cycles. In the first cycle, in vivo and descriptive coding were completed manually in order to honor and summarize the -participants' voices (Saldaña, 2009). Following in-vivo and descriptive coding, pattern coding was performed in order to locate patterns and consistencies across the data corpus (Saldaña, 2009). These secondary codes were used to determine categories and sub-categories and eventually led to the determination of four key themes. Two of the themes related to the actual research experience while the remaining two themes were associated with the impact of the experience on participants, specifically related to views and beliefs about play in the early childhood classroom.

Findings

Four key findings emerged from the qualitative data gathered in this study. Two of these findings are associated with the impact of the experience and the other two are related to the research experience itself. The two themes connected to the impact of the discussion-case experience were a discrediting of the frequently articulated false dichotomy between playing and learning and the expression of the desire to become agents of change, specifically teachers with the aspiration to include play in the early childhood classroom despite the challenges. The two themes associated with the actual experience of analyzing and applying research to a discussion-case were the facilitation of communities of practice and feasibility; students felt this experience was advantageous because it was pragmatic and it encouraged collaboration among peers, facilitating the creation of a group of individuals that could share ideas and strategies. As we outline below, the findings have implications for teacher-educators as they prepare early childhood

pre-service teachers. In addition, we describe how these findings impacted the first author's preparation of teachers.

Dispelling the Play-Learn Dichotomy

All participants indicated an understanding that play is a vital learning tool in the early childhood classroom. They articulated a view of playing as a central instrument to achieve developmentally appropriate learning in the early childhood classroom, allowing children to develop, learn, and thrive. Participant two explained, "The purpose of children's play in the classroom is that children play to learn. That's how they discover. They need to have fun." Participant eight described the relationship between playing and learning by stating,

> I think kids are learning through every experience they have, whether it be through play, whether it be through a walk outside. For me, playing is learning, to me it's one in the same.

These comments indicate that participants recognized that play and learning are not separate concepts in the early childhood classrooms. This is encouraging because frequently there is a false dichotomy created between playing and learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Such a division denotes that children can either play *or* learn, but can't do both simultaneously. It is important for teachers to recognize that learning and playing are *not* mutually exclusive, and that, in fact, a great deal of learning occurs through play (Cooney, Gupton, & O'Laughlin, 2000).

The understanding that separating playing and learning into distinct categories in the early childhood classrooms is an artificial and erroneous dichotomy was a heartening finding because, as Snow (2012) suggests, early childhood teachers should not be debating whether their students play *or* learn, but encouraging both to happen simultaneously. Perceptions are important because teachers' beliefs impact their behavior in the classroom (Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). Vartuli (2005) calls beliefs "the heart of teaching" (p. 76). If early childhood teachers perceive/believe playing

and learning are inextricably linked, they may be more prone to foster play in their future classrooms. Therefore, research analysis with discussion-case application may serve to help halt the disappearance of play by creating teachers who understand the connection between playing and learning and consequently encourage playful learning. Consequently, teacher educators might use this technique as a means to foster research-based knowledge and beliefs in pre-service teachers around topics such as play in the classroom with the intention of influencing future practice.

Teachers as Agents of Change

The second finding that emerged was the enormous importance that participants want play to have in their future classrooms. During the interviews, participants described this fervent commitment to play in their future classrooms, expressing dedication to facilitating play opportunities when they become teachers. Participant two described what play might look like in her future classroom in this way:

> I definitely want the classroom that they feel free to explore all types of materials. I want them to have ample opportunity to play with their materials, to get to know their materials before they just shoot in and use it. If they're going to do painting, hey, let's have various tools to use for painting, not just a paintbrush. Let's have sponges, let's play with sponges, let's play with soap, let's play with water, let's see what effect that has on paper. Let's see what effect that has on sand. If we're playing with blocks, different types of blocks, not just wooden blocks. Lego blocks, paper blocks. I want my room to look like a classroom with an assortment of materials that are tangible, that kids feel safe and supported to go and explore them on their own as well as with support

Because play is considered DAP and pre-service teachers tend to advocate philosophies consistent with DAP (File & Gullo, 2002; Kim, 2011; Smith, 1997), the intention to incorporate and facilitate play-based opportunities is consistent with prior research.

This articulated commitment to play in the early childhood classroom appeared to align with students 'increased understanding of the value of play. Although students valued play in the

early childhood classroom prior to the experience, they possessed a better and deeper understanding of the purpose of play through the experience. They more clearly understood why play was essential and the serious consequences that arise from the disappearance of play. Participant five explained,

> I think it made me more confident. I know now what type of approach to go about it, based with letting the parents know ahead of time. With the teacher where the parents complained to the assistant principal, she probably felt she was confident, like she was doing her job because parents didn't know. If I was to tell the parents ahead of time then they will have more understanding, a different perspective of why play is so important.

Participant two explained,

> I think that now, play has more meaning in the classroom for me. From the studies, but overall since I've started education, play was just play until it became more in depth. Especially with the article, that has a real big purpose. Getting rid of it would do a lot of harm, I think, in the classroom.

Students articulated that the experience of analyzing research and applying it to a discussion-case provided them with more confidence in their convictions and this ultimately impacted their commitment to play in the classroom.

Although participants described a great commitment to learning through play in their future classrooms, they also expressed an understanding of the barriers and obstacles to this intention. Participant one revealed, "What I'm observing now at my site, there is not that many options for children to actually play. But I hope when I become a teacher the curriculum a little bit changes or loosens up." Similarly, participant four recognized that although play is very important to her, she could be in a context that doesn't make its implementation uncomplicated.

> If I am allowed to in whatever setting I'm in, it will be very important. I will still include it, incorporate it, and allow children to have that time. And, also free play and not just structured play, but free play to allow them to explore. It will be a big part. Of course, I'll use research to back me up, and I'll stand as firm on it as I can. I don't think that I would get rid of it at all. I'm still going to do my best to try to incorporate it somewhere throughout the day.

Correspondingly, participant two described her concern this way:

> I think that I want to have as much play as I can, but I've been discouraged since I've been doing [field] hours because you don't see it. Everything is so structured, even in kindergarten. Yeah. Everything is so structured. They're doing writing workshop, reading workshop, and it's like 15 minutes left for the center. What I see that I don't like, that I hope I don't do in the future as a teacher, is have the students finish work. What I see a lot is the teachers taking away the center time for the students to finish writing or reading or whatever they're working on. I hope that I don't do that as a teacher. They take away their center time to make them finish their work.

All of the participants that were interviewed possessed a commitment to incorporating play into their future classrooms, while they also expressed a realistic sense of the obstacles to implementing such play in the classroom. They discussed the disappearance of play and the likely barriers to implementing play that align with prior findings (Brashier & Norris, 2008; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2011). The accurate recognition of the probable obstacles to play in the classroom is encouraging because it is imperative that early childhood preparation programs incorporate the challenges from the field that students will face as teachers into their preparation (Vera & Geneser, 2012).

Because students expressed a deep commitment to play in their future classrooms despite the recognition of the likely obstacles, there appeared to be great determination to change the status quo. Participant four explained, "It lets me see now that I should probably fight for it more if I'm not given the opportunity to allow the children to play." Participant two expounded, "I'm definitely more dedicated or more determined to have play present." Play is rapidly disappearing from early childhood classrooms, so the commitment to its continuance after the discussion-case experience illustrates that participants possess characteristics typical of change agents (Bodrova, 2008). These teachers appear to be dedicated to teaching "against the grain" (Cochran-Smith, 1991, p. 280). They not only felt committed to play in their own future classrooms but also to helping others

understand the purpose and importance of playful learning. Participants expressed a desire to educate parents, administrators, and other teachers on the value of play in children's learning. Participant five explained,

> Instead of me just introducing play to the kids I will probably let the parents know ahead of time informing them I'm introducing children to be able to learn about play, saying why it's important, educating them before they shut me down saying, "I don't want to do play in my classroom, I don't want play because it's not important." Just letting parents know.

Participant six described how she might use research on the benefits of play, specifically with a school principal:

> We're always looking for proof, so if I were to come up to the principal and tell him, "Listen, there's been research that's been done specifically towards that play is important and this some of the research that's been done, and make them aware of what's going on. They'll be an impact to the way I would describe it

The education of people in these positions appears valuable as prior research has indicated that parents, other teachers, and administrators can be major barriers to the implementation of play opportunities in the classroom (Lynch, 2015). Chen (2005) found that change agents not only influence their own classroom but those surrounding them, including other teachers and administrators. If this deep commitment to play in the classroom, including the education of other teachers and administrators, results in teachers being able to overcome likely obstacles, they will be exhibiting what Achinstein and Ogawa (2006) termed "principled resistance" (p. 32). Principled resistance is defined as "overt or covert acts that reject instructional policies, programs, or other efforts to control teachers 'work that undermine or contradict professional principles" (p. 32). Acts of "principled resistance" allow teachers to defend their professional convictions through action despite a culture that seemingly requires the opposite (Paris & Lung, 2008). Many participants appeared to exhibit an agentic stance towards play in the classroom after the research experience, demonstrating "principled resistance" through a strong dedication to play as pedagogy in a climate

that is increasingly opposed to this. This agentic stance can assist in hindering the loss of play in the early childhood classroom. Hence, this finding indicates research analysis with discussion-case application may offer a tactic for teacher educators in fostering change agents committed to reversing the trend of play disappearance.

Community of Practice

Participants found it advantageous to work in small groups for the research analysis and the discussion-case application. They expressed that dividing the reading among group members, becoming an expert on just a component of the reading, discussing the reading with peers, and working through the discussion-case with others, were all beneficial components of the experience. This finding indicates that the classroom experience was, in part, advantageous because of the collaborative nature of the activity. Specifically, students described the shared experience as valuable because, through discussion, it fostered a deep understanding of the material and concept, ultimately resulting in the feeling of being part of a community of practice. The students'

descriptions of the small group experience demonstrated the initial development of communities of practice. Wenger (2006) described a community of practice as,

> Formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (p. 1).

A community of practice has three key components; members have a shared interest, help one another through discussions and by sharing information, and are practitioners with a shared practice (Wenger, 2006). When participants described the experience of collaboratively analyzing research and applying it to a discussion-case they frequently referenced all three of these components.

Participants felt that they gained a deeper understanding of the reading and the discussion-case because they were exposed to different viewpoints through their group discussion, which helped them understand the concepts more completely. As participant two explained,

> That was a good way to do it because not everyone reads the same, and if you're reading the whole thing by yourself you might miss something more important from the others. I still, even though I read the whole thing, I was still able to take from the other members of my group that I had missed.

Additionally, participants described feeling connected by a common interest and concern. As participant eight explained, "It was good because it was a shared interest, and also I think we all shared the same concerns, and we were all surprised that we don't think that this is an appropriate way to teach." Furthermore, students described discussions that led them to think about their own practice, specifically their future classrooms. Participant one explained,

> You let us keep going with the discussion. Even having the time with the discussion, people decided to bring in personal experiences about them being in a classroom, working under not very successful supervisors and stuff. We actually had deep conversation, like the research and the whole activity had us started getting into deep conversation about experiences and you know, how we would want our future classroom to be

It appears that, through meaningful discussions and peer feedback, working in a small group helped students to more deeply understand the material and contemplate multiple perspectives and possibilities.

Ultimately, for some students, the group discussion led them to alter their initial solutions to the discussion-case and their perspective on play in the classroom. For example, participant one described how members of the group assisted her in modifying her original resolution to the discussion-case through the dialogue they engaged in and the feedback she received. She explained,

> It was good working with the group when we had to decide what we would do with the lesson plan. Because after hearing, like I was really strong on I'm going to make my own decision, I'm going to change it. But then after hearing other people's opinion and them

telling their own experience of being in the classroom, it helped you, it helped me realize I had to change how I was thinking a little bit. Just chunking the research paper and then having other people give you their opinions, even though I read their pieces, having their opinion, and having their feedback was really helpful.

This student recalled that initially, she suggested one approach to the dilemma presented in the scenario, but through a lengthy discussion, she came to support a slightly altered tactic, which she described as a combination of the views of the group. Engaging as a member of a community of practice helped refine her thoughts on the topic.

In addition, the small group work also facilitated a renewed focus and commitment to play as a viable and important educational tool. Indeed the small group work established a community of practice that specifically supported advocacy. Participant eight explained,

I think the concern with the negative effects was more heightened because we worked in a group. Then you're in a little support system of people who want to radicalize education, and that share your same concerns and share your feelings. Then here we are together reading this, and then we're trying to figure out a way to advocate for better, healthier experiences at school, and a better educational approach. I think it just heightened our concern. I think if I would have read it alone and shared it with someone, they may not have appreciated it as much as I did. I think that in a group setting with people that your values a little aligned in certain senses help reinforce hey, this is something that is not right, that it's not okay, that something has to happen here.

It appears that working collaboratively helped students to feel supported in their views. This sense of backing bolstered participants' desire to serve as advocates for an educational approach that they deemed appropriate and necessary.

This finding is consistent with prior research on the value of cooperative learning strategies and the role of social interaction in the learning process (Aronson et al., 1978; Bodrova, 1997; Davis, 1993; Halley et al., 2013; Hänze, & Berger, 2007; Hausfather, 2001; Perkins & Saris, 2001; Walker & Crogan, 1998). This finding indicates that the experience of analyzing research and applying it to a discussion-case was beneficial, at least in part, because it allowed students to work

collaboratively on the task, sharing the reading and discussing it in such a way that manageability was improved and understanding was increased.

However, this finding also supplements the research on collaborative work. Because students enjoyed and benefitted from working in small cooperative groups when engaged in research analysis with discussion-case application, articulating that this helped them in developing a deepened understanding of and commitment to play in the early childhood classroom, such collective efforts appear to be a key component in assisting pre-service teachers become teachers capable of facilitating playful learning experiences in their future classrooms despite the challenges. Participants felt included in a community of practice that was dedicated to analyzing and understanding a complex concept and determining feasible research-based solutions. This finding indicates that the approach of analyzing research and applying it to a realistic scenario as a communal endeavor seems to be a significant element of the experience and important for its effectiveness as a tool for teacher educators. This is an important finding that can be used by teacher educators as they create meaningful experiences for their students.

Pragmatic Experience

Participants felt that the application portion of the activity, which allowed them to use research immediately to work through a dilemma, was advantageous because it provided a rich experience that was practical in nature. Applying the research to a discussion-case helped students to appreciate the material more deeply. Participant four described this by stating,

> If we just had a group conversation and then we didn't really apply it, it would be like reading a novel. I feel like it would just be reading but not reading to actually understand and say, oh, apply it. Like, actually, apply it to something and take it with you. I feel like it would have just been like we were just reading to read.

The same student expressed why she felt it was beneficial to apply the research to a discussion-case after analyzing it, explaining,

I guess when you're applying something, you're utilizing it more. You have to dig deeper, you have to think deeper than to just read the article, and say, "Okay," and you place the article aside. Having to do the study along with it and apply the actual article, it makes you think and reflect on what you're seeing and what you know and your experiences.

The application process assisted participants with their understanding of the topic by facilitating deeper thinking and reflection. However, it was not simply the application of research to a discussion-case that was highlighted as a significant component of the experience, but specifically the fact that the discussion-case was realistic in nature. In this way, the discussion-case helped facilitate a clearer understanding of the obstacles for teachers interested in facilitating playful learning opportunities and served as a practice run for tackling these barriers.

Participants expressed the feeling that the discussion-case provided an opportunity to understand what is actually occurring in the field. Participant four explained,

It gives me more information and it helps me to see how other people are thinking and it give me deeper knowledge in to something that is relevant or something that is going on within the field of education and children.

The application to a discussion-case provided participants with practice facing something that they will likely confront shortly, in real life. Participant two explained,

You can read research to read it, but if you're not applying it, you're not really gaining from it, so if you have a discussion case or something like this graphic, something to put the research into, you're going to remember it and it going to stay with you. It gives me a chance to, things like this are going to happen, this is a normal situation. It's is not out of the blue, so I think coming out of college we think it's great and dandy, and it's really hard.

The activity allowed students to rehearse handling the likely barriers to play in the classroom. Because participants read about and discussed the expected obstacles they will face as teachers when trying to facilitate play based opportunities in the classroom, the research experience provided the opportunity to discuss a genuine issue, making the activity practical and relevant in nature. As participant eight stated,

It just gave me another example of a problem that may occur later, so just, hey, if you have this situation occur, then just be ready because these steps are things you can apply to that. I like the applying it. I feel that again, it helps strengthen our skillset. It helps us understand what we're doing and why we're doing it. Understanding different cases shows us the different barriers that we may face, the different barriers that exist, and why this research is being used.

Similarly, participant three believed that the experience provided her with feasible strategies for combatting a likely issue in her future, explaining,

From here on out if I ever came across the scenario, I would know how to approach it in a more adult, professional way and I would be able to say, "research shows that if we allow them to play, they're more productive."

Not only is the experience practical because it illuminates likely challenges, but because it also offers students an opportunity to explore solutions. This trial experience of facing and resolving realistic challenges provided students with an encounter they deemed as pragmatic and representative of their futures, and therefore advantageous. Consequently, it appears that a fundamental piece of the research experience was the *true-to-life* nature of the discussion-case issue, which allowed a student to feel that they were experiencing a likely practitioner-based scenario that may assist them in the future.

Overall, participants expressed the sentiment that applying research to a discussion-case was more helpful than just reading and discussing the research without the application component, providing a very practical learning experience. The process appeared to assist participants with their understanding of the concept by facilitating deeper thinking and reflection and also afforded them the opportunity to practice for their futures, as head teachers, when they will likely face challenges to implementing play in their classrooms. This finding is consistent with prior research on the value of discussion-cases, allowing students to bridge the gap between theory, research, and practice; engage in a remote but genuine classroom experience; make connections to real world and personal experiences; and encourage meaningful discussion (Broudy, 1990; Butler et al., 2006;

Erdman, 1983; Floyd & Bodur, 2005; Goldblatt & Smith, 2005; Koc, 2012; Perry & Power, 2004; Pitton, 2010; Schrader et al., 2003; Sudzina & Kilbane, 1994). However, this finding also contributes something new to the research on discussion-cases, specifically the application to a novel setting, The experience of applying research on the topic of play to a realistic discussion-case about the issues that frequently surround the implementation of play in the classroom is an insight-provoking strategy that can be used by teacher educators, helping pre-service teachers become more aware of the trend of play disappearance and possibly more confident in and dedicated to reversing it.

Implications

Students enjoyed and articulated benefit from the experience of engaging in research analysis with discussion-case application, indicating that the activity can serve as a useful tool for working with pre-service teachers. This study illustrates that the experience of research analysis with discussion-case application was viewed positively by participants because it was seen as practical and collaborative in nature. Students appreciated participating in research analysis with discussion-case application as part of a cooperative small group, describing a deeper understanding of and commitment to play in the early childhood classroom; the collaborative effort appeared to be a key component of the experience. Students also described the pragmatic nature of the discussion-case activity as another vital element of the experience. Participants described the opportunity to use research immediately with a discussion-case as advantageous, providing practical experience, at least in part, because the discussion-case was realistic in nature. Because the discussion-case described probable challenges and offered students an opportunity to explore realistic solutions, students viewed the experience as pragmatic. The findings suggest that research analysis with discussion-case application, when the case facilitates a practical experience in a

collaborative context, can be used as a powerful technique by teacher educators.

The findings from this qualitative study are encouraging because they demonstrate the potential of facilitated research analysis with discussion case application as a strategy for building awareness of the value of play in the early childhood classroom as well as its disappearance. Unfortunately, the authors know that many prospective teachers have limited opportunities to learn about or observe play in the classroom. Cooperating teachers hosting pre-service teachers (as they participate in fieldwork and student-teaching) do not always function as models for appropriate play in the classroom, even when they espouse play (Vera & Geneser, 2012). This phenomenon is attributed to the reality of today's early childhood classrooms where teachers frequently value play but experience tremendous challenges in implementing it due largely to an emphasis on testing, rigid schedules, and standards (Ranz-Smith, 2007). Therefore, pre-service teachers can complete their teacher education programs possessing only a very rudimentary sense of the pedagogy of play, lacking the experience of witnessing its implementation in classrooms and with students, and without the ability to articulate in detail the value of play. This is likely the case for participants in this study, who complete their fieldwork and student-teaching in New York City (NYC) schools where Miller & Almon (2009) found that 79% of kindergarten teachers spend time each day on test-preparation, and play is frequently completely eliminated or relegated to a minor and occasional activity. Furthermore, on a typical school day, kindergarteners in NYC spend four to six times more of their day receiving literacy and math instruction and preparing for tests (or taking them) than engaged in play or choice time; this amounts to less than 30 minutes of play per day (Miller & Almon, 2009). These conditions and constraints may explain why Miller & Almon (2009) found that teachers are rarely capable of accurately and in detail articulating the relationship between playing and learning in the early childhood classroom, despite contending that play is

important.

However, participants in this study were capable of verbalizing this relationship in significant detail, countering the all too prevalent false dichotomy of playing and learning. For these participants, engaging in research analysis with discussion-application provided an opportunity to explore play in the early childhood classroom as well as some of the realistic challenges associated with play implementation, increasing their understanding of the relationship between playing and learning, and allowing them to articulate this connection with clarity and conviction, debunking the erroneous separation of playing and learning. Miller & Almon (2009) describe how we can reverse the disappearance of play, specifically in the kindergarten classroom, discussing the need to use a variety of methods in teacher-education programs to inform and prepare teachers to create effective play programs. Discussion-case work in teacher-education programs may be one of the many effective techniques used in this process. After completing this research, the first author has added discussion-case work to her curriculum, allowing student-teachers to read and apply research to discussion-cases that address many key course themes and concepts, including, but not limited to, play. Therefore, this research informed the teaching of many key concepts in addition to the importance of play in the early childhood classroom.

Furthermore, nurturing the development of change-agents through teacher-preparation programs may be one of the crucial ingredients to reversing the trend of play disappearance in the early childhood classroom. Because pre-service teachers quickly become new teachers, they have the potential to bring new research-based ideas to the field, influencing dominant practice (Vera & Geneser, 2012). New teachers can become vital change agents (Bodrova, 2008). We know that developmentally appropriate practice, including play in the early childhood classroom, can be difficult to accomplish in the prevailing climate (Paris & Lung, 2008). Consequently, many new

teachers leave their teacher preparation programs aware of the benefits of play, but they don't facilitate and foster such outcomes (Paris & Lung, 2008). Hence, it is not enough to understand the value and purpose of play. Teacher education programs need to enable the development of teachers capable of implementing appropriate play opportunities in the early childhood classroom *despite* the many challenges and barriers. Cochran-Smith (1991) called this the facilitation of teachers capable of "teaching against the grain" (p. 280). It is with this need in mind, this study's treatment was designed, with the purpose of facilitating such an ability in pre-service teachers. The first author continues to provide discussion-case opportunities in courses that allow pre-service students the opportunity to explore realistic challenges while facilitating their ability to effectively confront and overcome these likely barriers.

It is unquestionably not too late to reverse the current trend of teacher-directed instruction replacing play, for "In spite of dwindling time and materials for dramatic and imaginative play… children's innate playfulness is irrepressible, like a plant pushing up through a crack in concrete… given the slightest opportunity, many children seize the moment" (Miller & Almon, 2009). This study demonstrates that research analysis with discussion-application may be a promising strategy for enabling the development of such agentic teachers. This finding indicates that participants may be emerging change agents who not only wish to assert "principled resistance" (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, p. 32) in their own classrooms but possess a desire and commitment to influence others, including fellow teachers and administrators (Chen, 2005). The discussion-case used in this study allowed pre-service teachers to reflect on their role as agents of "principled resistance" (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, p. 32), defending their professional convictions, including the value of play as pedagogy, despite a climate that frequently encourages just the opposite (Paris & Lung,

2008). For participants, the research experience not only fostered a deep understanding of the role of play in the classroom, including the inseparable connection between playing and learning, and a commitment to playful pedagogy, it also appeared to inspire change agent thinking. The current study reveals that students possessed an ardent belief in play after the research experience, indicating that collaborative research analysis with discussion-case application offers a valuable strategy for developing resolute beliefs, and consequently possibly playing a role in fostering teacher agency. It was this specific finding related to facilitating change that provided the first author with the motivation to create discussion-cases for future courses on topics and areas that students specifically identified as needing change. For example, after several students described feeling frustrated in placements where the mandated language arts curriculum did not match research-based best practices, she developed a discussion-case addressing this situation, thereby validating student experiences and contributing to the development of their agency as teachers.

Conclusion

Although play in the early childhood classroom represents developmentally appropriate practice and research consistently establishes its effectiveness and appropriateness in this context, it continues to vanish from classrooms. Because play is rapidly disappearing from the early childhood classroom despite the convincing research on its effectiveness, it was sensible to examine the impact of an experience related to the disappearance of play. This study's research questions were designed to address how facilitated research analysis with discussion-case application impacted pre-service teachers 'perceptions of the role and value of play as well as their confidence in implementing play opportunities in the classroom despite realistic obstacles, and to explore the experience of using the strategy of discussion-case application as a learning instrument. This study's findings are promising because they demonstrate the potential of facilitated research

analysis with discussion-case application as an approach and tool in the preparation of teachers, facilitating a deep understanding of the purpose and importance of play in the early childhood classroom, as well as potentially cultivating a dedication to preserving play in the early childhood classroom.

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