THE ROLE OF PLAY
IN PROMOTING CHILDREN'S
POSITIVE APPROACHES TO LEARNING

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Defining Young Children's "Approaches to Learning" as a Dimension of School Readiness

Ever since the National Education Goals Panel described five domains of school readiness (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995), there has been growing interest in one of these domains: a set of motivational and dispositional constructs that together form what have been called "approaches to learning," "learning behaviors," or "learning-related skills" (Fantuzzo, Perry, & McDermott, 2004; Hyson, 2008; McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006). Together, these constructs focus on *how* children learn, rather than *what* they learn. Although researchers and policymakers have grouped them in various ways, the items typically include what have been called (a) "enthusiasm for learning"--interest, pleasure, and motivation to learn, and (b) "engagement in learning"--focused attention, persistence, flexibility, and self-regulation (Hyson, 2008; McWilliam & Casey, 2008).

As a dimension of school readiness and a desired outcome for children, "Approaches to Learning" has become one of the core domains in Head Start's Child Outcomes Framework (Head Start Bureau, 2001) as well as a category in the Early Learning Guidelines developed by a number of states (Scott-Little, Martella, & Milburn, 2007). Additionally, many of the dimensions of what have been called Approaches to Learning are also included in abilities termed "executive functions,'' receiving considerable attention from cognitive and developmental psychologists (Zelazo, Muller, Frye, Marcovitch, Argitis, Boseovski, et al., 2003).

The Developmental Significance of Approaches to Learning

 Children's interest in learning, motivation to learn, flexibility, persistence, self-regulation, and other Approaches-to-Learning dimensions are valuable in themselves, but they have also been found to support children's achievement in cognitive, social-emotional, and academic domains. For example, preschoolers who were more flexible in a problem-solving task had higher academic achievement in kindergarten and first grade (George & Greenfield, 2005); kindergarten children who had better "learning-related skills" in kindergarten had better math and reading skills in later grades (McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006); Head Start children who were more persistent and attentive developed

stronger vocabulary skills; across multiple studies, the depth of children's interest has been a consistent predictor of their academic achievement (Renninger, Hidi, & Krapp, 1992); children's academic success in kindergarten was predicted from the extent of their engagement in classroom activities (Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer, & Pianta, 2005); and children who developed greater self-regulation were more likely to be academically successful (Blair, 2002).

Early Childhood Programs as Contributors to Positive Approaches to Learning

There is considerable evidence that certain features of early childhood programs may strengthen children's enthusiasm for and engagement in learning, although caution is needed, as most of the research is correlational. For example, curriculum features such as the use of small groups have been associated with greater engagement. Conversely, children were found to be the least engaged during whole-group instruction (Powell, Burchinal, File, & Kontos, 2008). Curricula that integrate across academic or subject matter domains appeared to promote children's interest and motivation (Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004). A number of studies have found that curricula that foster choice, independence, and appropriate levels of challenge and complexity were associated with greater motivation and engagement (Hyson, 2008; Stipek, 2002); in contrast, strongly didactic curricula have seemed to be associated with less interest and lower motivation to learn (Stipek, Daniels, Feiler, & Milburn, 1995).

The Specific Role of Play in Promoting Positive Approaches to Learning

Direct evidence that play promotes greater enthusiasm for and engagement in learning is still limited. However, many of the features of early childhood environments that are known to contribute to young children's engagement, self-regulation, interest, flexibility, persistence, and other Approaches to Learning/Learning Behaviors—as outlined above—seem to be inherent features of the kinds of experiences that are described as "play" or "playful learning" (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). Even superficial observation shows the extent to which playful activities are associated with children's deep involvement, motivation, and pleasure. If play is an inherently engaging, motivating activity, its role as a stimulus for promoting a variety of positive Approaches to Learning calls for further investigation.

Some research has addressed specific connections between play and Approaches to Learning, although much more research is needed. For example, Fantuzzo, Sekino. & Cohen (2004) found that aspects of Approaches to Learning, such as preschoolers' later engagement in learning activities and self-regulation, could be predicted from children's earlier competence in playing with peers. Although these results were correlational and based on teacher report, Diamond and colleagues' recent experimental study (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Monroe, 2007) offers converging evidence by showing higher levels of

executive functioning among children who had participated in the Tools of the Mind curriculum (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Hyson, Copple, & Jones, 2006), which prioritizes pretend play and other activities to foster self-regulation.

Moving Toward a Research Agenda on Play and Approaches to Learning

Based on the preceding analysis, children's play appears to have great potential to promote positive Approaches to Learning. Further research may more precisely identify the conditions under which this potential may be realized. Questions that might inform a research agenda include the following:

1. What are the effects of play-based experiences on children's Approaches to Learning?

2. What specific dimensions of Approaches to Learning may be affected by these experiences? For example, do play experiences differentially affect motivation to learn; flexibility; self-regulation; focused attention?

3. Do different kinds of play experiences (such as pretend play vs. object play vs. creative exploration) have different effects on children's Approaches to Learning?

4. What teacher behaviors and teacher-child interactions are needed in order to maximize play's potential as an impetus toward enthusiastic and engaged learning?

5. What are effective ways of preparing teachers, through pre- and inservice professional development, to implement and assess the kinds of play experiences that are likely to enhance various Approaches to Learning dimensions?

Concluding Summary

Children's enthusiasm for and engagement in learning are essential foundations for school success. Early childhood program environments can either support or undermine these positive Approaches to Learning. Various environmental features that have been found to increase enthusiasm and engagement are naturally integrated within high-quality play. For this reason, focused research is needed to further illuminate ways in which play's potential role in developing young children's Approaches to Learning may be maximized.

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