Letters to the Editor

Children’s Play Is Hard Work! Are Early Childhood Teachers Adequately Prepared?

Ageliki Nicolopoulou [2010] has argued that play is disappearing from early childhood education because pressure for universal school readiness and No Child Left Behind has meant replacing ‘child-centered, play-oriented, and constructivist approaches’ with didactic teaching of pre-academic skills. Our recent analysis of 2,751 children’s experiences in 11 state prekindergartens certainly supports this observation [Chien et al., in press]. On average, children spent about one third of their time in the programs sitting in circle time or another whole-group activity. While most children in this study did have some free-choice activities, free choice did not necessarily mean free play, and fantasy play was not always allowed. However, more worrisome to me than the little time to play was the little time to engage with the teacher. Children spent by far the largest amount of time in didactic interactions with a teacher (on average 31%) and a small proportion of the classroom day engaged in scaffolding interactions with the teacher (9%). Furthermore, profile analysis of these children’s experiences resulted in the smallest group of children (13%) experiencing high-quality responsive interactions with teachers while engaged in free-choice activities.

Nicolopoulou [2010] emphasized that she is not talking merely about children’s play without teacher intervention. However, my reading of the literature on children’s social and cognitive school readiness suggests that more is needed than simply integrating play into the preschool curriculum. Preschool children need teachers who are close observers of children’s play and conversations, actively engage in using these observations to further children’s learning, and finally, act as a moral authority in the classroom in order to keep all children emotionally safe.

These are big tasks for our teachers and ones that many, if not most, early childhood teachers are not prepared for. Too often in this world of No Child Left Behind, social interaction, among peers and between children and adults, is given less attention than individual children’s pre-
academic skills. There is increasing evidence that children learn best in a classroom that is emotionally safe and one that promotes learning for all members of the group [Howes & Ritchie, 2002]. From watching the meeting, collision, and resolution of different children’s interests and ideas in fantasy play, teachers can understand the particular dynamics of the peer culture of the classroom and then, with this knowledge, explicitly confirm or challenge and disconfirm these in conversations with the children. In this way, all children are included in the learning community. My experience with professional development of early childhood teachers is that teachers cannot learn to scaffold through meaningful play experiences or organize classrooms that help children feel safe and able to learn if they have never experienced such teacher-child interactions or classrooms. Recent research on professional development of early childhood teachers suggests that teacher education programs that require teachers to engage in a regular cycle of observation and feedback related to their interactions with students in their own classrooms can show gains in mastering effective teacher-child interactions [Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, & Justice, 2008]. This is a direction that needs to be combined with giving children more time to play.

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References


Not a Good Idea to Play around with Early Literacy Instruction

Ageliki Nicolopoulou’s [2010] plea to shun early reading instruction to preserve preschool and kindergarten playtime echoes century-old warnings of physicians and psychologists. Those earlier Cassandras claimed that efforts to teach reading to young children would end in the ‘morbidity of precocity’ and ‘imbecility or premature old age’ [McGill-Franzen, 1992, p. 56]. Most, today, will find those earlier cautions wildly exaggerated and perhaps even comical, but Nicolopoulou’s recent essay fits this tradition well – including overstated claims of harmful early teaching to a dearth of empirical evidence supporting these assertions.

There is surprisingly little evidence for the basic premise that play has been elbowed out of early childhood by prescriptive curricula linked to standardized tests. Earlier in the decade, studies showed that about 10% of Head Start teachers never offered reading lessons, and another 20% did so once a week or less [Zill, Resnick, & O’Donnell, 2001]. The latest data suggest a slight increase in such instruction, which has been accompanied by both increases in letter-name knowledge (average gains of about 6 letters) and improved social skills [US Department of Health and Human Services, 2006]. And what of those who are teaching reading skills? Between 59 and 70% of Head Start and other early childhood education programs use either the High/Scope Curriculum or the Creative Curriculum [Jackson et al., 2007; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2005]. Neither of these popular programs is linked to standardized test results, and it is hard to imagine that their heavy emphasis on songs, storytelling, finger play, book-sharing, and movement activities really differs much from play in terms of potential cognitive impacts.

Like Nicolopoulou [2010], I suggest more reading instruction in kindergarten (both more than in the preschools and more than in the past), and that kindergarten curricula really are more academic in nature and print-focused in design, though there is surprisingly little evidence supporting either concession. Nevertheless, she and I draw different conclusions from these ‘radical changes in kindergarten practice’. Nicolopoulou portentously contended that an emphasis on literacy instruction in the early years flies ‘in the face of much that we know about young children’s learning and development’. She went on to intimate that this approach fails to lay the proper foundations for later learning and development which obviously would be harmful for children in the long run.

My approach to this kind of problem is to seek empirical data with direct bearing on the issue, rather than grasping for confirming opinions of other authorities, as is done in Nicolopoulou’s [2010] essay. I assume, for example, that if kindergarten reading instruction is harmful then one would presumably be able to discern problems from normative samples. Anecdotes aside, the data
that do exist indicate that kindergarten reading instruction is not harmful. In a study of formal kindergarten reading instruction [Hanson & Farrell, 1995], data were collected from 3,959 high school seniors from 10 states. These data included measures of the amount of kindergarten reading instruction these students had experienced, and these were correlated with their subsequent performance. Kindergarten reading instruction was consistently associated with higher reading competency, higher grades in school, better attendance, fewer remedial experiences, and more positive attitudes toward reading, and these benefits were apparent in all demographic groups, but were most evident in students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This study is among the best of several with very similar outcomes. If the bad effects of kindergarten reading instruction are not showing up by the time students are 18, maybe they never will.

Nicolopoulou [2010] claimed, again without data, that ‘what is most important is not to train preschoolers in specific literacy-related skills, such as letter recognition and decoding, but to help them develop a broader range of cognitive and oral language skills and to foster their motivation for future learning’. I certainly agree with the idea that early education should support children's cognitive, linguistic, and affective development, but why ignore the benefits of early instruction in letter recognition and decoding? Not only did the National Early Literacy Panel [2008] synthesize hundreds of studies of tens of thousands of children demonstrating the close relationship of such skills with later reading achievement, it also examined more than 80 experimental studies showing clear benefits of such instruction. Furthermore, more complex studies – that controlled for verbal intelligence – found that these print- and decoding-related skills continued to have a significant relationship with reading comprehension through seventh grade.

Where I agree with Nicolopoulou [2010] is in the idea that posing didactic/academic teaching versus play is a false dichotomy; one that is more likely to mislead than to clarify. There is plenty of evidence suggesting that the best early reading instruction, at least for the kinds of skills Nicolopoulou abhors, needs to be delivered individually or to small groups with lots of student-teacher interaction [National Early Literacy Panel, 2008], and that such early instruction should require or encourage engagement and invention on the part of the students [Ehri et al., 2001]. Studies even show that literacy can be embedded successfully in preschool play activities, in which children operate restaurants, libraries, and post offices [Neuman & Roskos, 1997].

Given the tragic disparities in school outcomes across racial, linguistic, and economic lines, what is needed is not a campaign against policies that support early reading instruction, but renewed efforts to expand literacy learning opportunities for all young children. Rather than courting some mythical public backlash against early literacy teaching based on purported, yet
invisible, harm caused by too early teaching, we ought to be redoubling our efforts to promote instructional practices that deliver clear benefits to children.

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**References**


Children's Play and Its Educational Significance

After decades of work as scholars of children’s play and teacher educators as well as former preschool teachers both in and outside of the US, we are well aware of the significance of play in young children’s development and education. Based on our scholarship and classroom experiences, we support the efforts of Nicolopoulou [2010] and others [e.g., Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006] that play must be brought back to the early childhood classroom [Göncü, Abel, & Boshans, in press]. As argued by Kamii and DeVries [1977] and in our own graduate program description inspired by Piaget and Vygotsky [Göncü, Main, & Abel, 2009], play is a spontaneous, developmentally appropriate, and educationally productive activity of childhood. It enables the discovery of knowledge and development of adaptive personalities that will not be accomplished through practice and drill. Thus, it should be reinstated in the early childhood classroom now!

There is more to the story, however. In order for this effort to bear fruit, we must begin the education about the significance of play among ourselves, developmental psychologists. Unfortunately, a look at the treatment of play by professional organizations such as the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) reveals that this very organization hardly makes a concerted effort against the disappearance of play from the classroom. More to the point, by not including a review chapter on play in the 1998 version of the Handbook of child psychology, the SRCD gave the message that play does not count. The official publication of the SRCD, Child development, has not made any efforts such as organizing special issues on children’s play. Without such efforts, discussions about the significance of play will be limited to only a concerned few, and scant references to play in Child development will continue, only to enable the responsible parties to have a defense about its inclusion.

Second, we agree with Nicolopoulou [2010] that we need to do more research on the effects and outcomes of play. However, developmentalists’ defense of play based solely on its correlates is insufficient and potentially misleading. Correlational research can be easily dismissed by the doubtful. Intervention studies can be ignored because the so-called interventions can be seen unjustified, and the interventions themselves may be easily interpreted as adults doing direct teaching instead of enabling the development of play. Finally, research on the effects and outcomes of play does not always reveal consistent results due to differences in conceptualization and measurement across studies, leading the doubtful to develop arguments against play.

Rather, we need to do what developmental researchers have been avoiding: We must do research on the phenomenon of play itself and illustrate what children do when they play, as Nicolopoulou [2010] also argued. Play should be valued not only because of its correlates – such
as literacy and other academic skills – but also because it enables cognitive, affective, and communicative development as evidenced in children’s negotiations [Göncü, 1993]. If we understand how children negotiate such complex phenomena as their relationships and conflicts, cooperation and competition, creativity and problem solving, power and risk taking, morality and fairness, and cultural and gender identity, play’s contribution to children’s development will become clearer. Unless we explicate in thick descriptions the significance of play as a substantive activity of childhood in its own right, we risk demoting play to only an instructional medium. But, to provide such descriptions, developmental psychologists will need to collaborate with teacher educators, classroom teachers, parents, and the children themselves. Any kind of extensive experience with young children shows that this kind of collaboration will reveal important evidence that play speaks for itself more powerfully than the correlations.

Third and finally, not addressed in the present commentary by Nicolopoulou [2010], there are important cultural and individual differences in play. We need to understand the backgrounds of children’s play, including the role of adults, in order to support and expand their play in the classroom. When we understand cultural and individual differences in children’s play, we will not make expressly ethnocentric and ableist statements such as likening a classroom with no toys on the floor to ‘a school in a third world country with severely limited resources…Or, perhaps a school for children with some rare medical syndrome…’ [Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009, p. 5]. We know that in the third world, the absence of toys or adult support does not mean that children do not play [Gaskins, 1999]. We also know that language play such as teasing observed in the non-Western or low-income US communities does not require the use of toys [Göncü, Jain, & Tuerner, 2007].

In summary, given the complexity of play and the cultural variations in this curious activity of childhood, to assume that any kind of play = learning [Singer et al, 2006] fails to adequately convey the important work we must undertake. We must examine play from the perspective of children and their families as well as from our own middle-class Western perspectives and construct shared understandings with them. Only then will we be able to reach mutually acceptable and fair decisions about the necessity of play in the classroom.

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References


Complexity and Nuance in Navigating Cultural Worlds and Identities: A Response to Commentaries on ‘Navigating Cultural Worlds and Negotiating Identities: A Conceptual Model’

We appreciate the thoughtful commentaries on our paper by Jean Phinney [2010] and by Seth Schwartz and Jennifer Unger [2010]. These commentaries not only underscored the complexities and nuances of the processes of navigating cultural worlds and identities that we theorize, they delineated additional features of complexity that both commentaries indicated the
field is now ready to address. We share the sense of anticipation about the field reflected in
Schwartz and Unger’s concluding comment: ‘The fact that these questions are ready to be posed
suggests that the field of cultural studies is ready to take its next major step’. We also concur with
Jean Phinney’s acknowledgement of the difficulties inherent in conducting research to examine the
complexities in developmental processes and the need for more discussion of the topic, through
conference presentations, journal articles, and courses. Our response to the commentaries is
aimed at continuing the constructive and invaluable dialogue that is necessary to co-construct
integrative approaches that can bridge multiple perspectives. In this context, we organize our
response to the commentaries around three issues that we believe merit continued dialogue and
synthesis of approaches: (a) definitions and delineation of underlying constructs; (b) multiple
endpoints and pathways, and (c) conceptualization of the processes by which development occurs.
We do not suggest these as the only issues that need discussion; we simply limit ourselves to
these because these are the issues highlighted in the commentaries.

Both commentaries directly or indirectly raised issues of definition of the construct. In their
commentary on our paper, Schwartz and Unger [2010] equated the concept of navigating multiple
worlds with biculturalism. They briefly discussed biculturalism as it has been defined in the field, as
well as acculturation, and led up to their expanded definition of acculturation to include cultural
practices, values, and identifications. For us, this discussion highlighted the need to clarify the
overlaps between biculturalism, acculturation, and bicultural identity, with a particular focus on
differentiating between processes and outcomes. It raised questions about biculturalism as a
process (in which case it overlaps with acculturation, or with bicultural identity formation as a
component of acculturation), or as an outcome (e.g., various types or extent of being acculturated,
of which biculturalism is an alternative). It was precisely this need for clarification, stimulated by an
earlier paper by Schwartz and his colleagues [Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006], that led us
to differentiate between the processes themselves (such as active meaning making and
interpretations of how one is located in their particular social world, processes of navigating,
negotiating, and selecting from among multiple interpretations, behaviors, values, etc.), and the
outcomes of these processes (i.e., the structure and organization of multiple identifications,
behavioral repertoires, and commitments). We suggest this as a valuable issue for continued
dialogue.

The second issue we raise emerged from Jean Phinney’s [2010] commentary in which she
thoughtfully identified specific components of navigating across cultures for which developmental
trajectories can be delineated. For example, she delineated developmental questions regarding
how children make choices about the demands of multiple cultural worlds, and the role of meaning-
making interpretations in this process. She also focused on the process of bicultural identity
formation as another component of navigating across cultures. This delineation of components and their potential developmental trajectories is exactly what is needed for a more fully specified model than the one we offered as a start. However, the implied ‘normalcy’ of a developmental progression from ‘an unformed or diffused identity to a secure committed identity’ raises questions for us similar to those posed by Schwartz and Unger [2010] in their discussion of when biculturalism is and is not adaptive, suggesting that there might well be multiple pathways and endpoints of navigating multiple cultures and identities. In an environment with people from multiple cultural heritages, flexible or shifting identities might well be the ideal outcome of identity development. Schwartz and Unger’s thoughtful delineation of specific features of environmental context and the associated forms of biculturalism that have been supported in the research literature are invaluable in the endeavor to develop a fully specified theory on the topic.

Finally, the third issue that we believe needs discussion centers on the processes whereby environmental and community features intersect with family and individual practices to create the conditions under which children develop expertise in navigating multiple cultural worlds and identities. First, a clarification seems to be in order. Schwartz and Unger [2010] interpreted our model as representing the family as ‘merely a conduit for larger environmental and cultural influences’, without acknowledging agency and intentional action on the part of parents in deciding how they want their children to acculturate. However, in our model, the family’s active processes of meaning making are represented in a number of ways. First, the constructs of familial ethno-theories and practices (e.g., choice to use multiple frames of reference), are by definition actively constructed. These constructs themselves represent the meaning-making processes of active interpretation, appraisals, and making choices that go beyond representing the family as merely a conduit of environmental circumstances. Second, in discussing our conceptualization of relations among community, familial, and individual constructs, we highlighted active meaning-making processes at the family level. For example, in hypothesizing how specific features of community context are instantiated or embodied [Overton, 2006] in specific features of family settings, we also explained that the socially and culturally constructed meanings and interpretations attributed by the family to environmental features, and the meaning-making processes through which individuals interpret their circumstances represent what Nicotera [2007] referred to as the place aspect of environmental contexts. In any case, to address the thorny issue of developmental processes, we propose that the relational meta-theoretical frame advanced by Overton [2006; in press] and his discussion of constructs such as interpenetration, co-action, emergence, and becoming to delineate developmental processes provide the basis for an integration of perspectives.

In concluding, we reiterate the sentiment expressed in both commentaries. The shared notions of underlying complexities and the fact that the authors of each commentary have delineated nuanced
features that further the development of the model do indeed suggest that the field is ready for the next major step in the co-construction of integrative perspectives. We look forward to the continued dialogue and discourse that both commentaries call for.

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References


