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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the research literature surrounding beliefs about children's play and the rationale for using play-based programming as part of early childhood special education practices. Discussions of recommended practices for educating or serving the needs of children typically refer to developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). DAP is defined, along with a discussion of its components. Two examples of play-based programming models are Linder's Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment/Intervention (TPBA/I) and McCord's Storybook Journey Curriculum (SJC). The TPBA/I model has six categories or levels of play. Identifying the primary category of a child's spontaneous play is important to determining the child's strengths and provides vital clues to use in planning interventions. Parent participation is systematically built in to the assessment and intervention process. SJC provides a structure for using children's literature to design play activities relative to the child's intervention and developmental needs. Twelve developmental implications of SJC are briefly explained. A particular advantage to play-based curricula is its use of existing materials within rural communities and homes. Adults who engage with a child in play demonstrate interactions with the child that can provide professionals with understandings about family expectations, beliefs, skills, and needs. Contains 24 references. (CDS)

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PLAY-BASED PROGRAMMING: ADVANTAGES FOR RURAL EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION

Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) services are intended to "prevent or reduce the effect of a disability on a child's development" (Diamon, Hestenes & O'Connor, 1994, p. 69). Implementing services from a framework that is inviting and engaging to family members, as well as professionals, is central to the successful implementation of any individualized program. Professional responsibilities needed for interactive planning can be complex and overwhelming to ECSE professionals in rural areas who are often faced with limited staff and material resources as well as complex child and family situations (Aakhus & Hoover, 1998; Haring & Lovett, 1996; Weiss & Correa, 1996). ECSE involves structuring a holistic environment in which skilled professionals take individual responsibility to collaborate with families and other professionals to create comprehensive programming for children with varying developmental delays in various home and community settings. Two most basic skills used by practitioners include the ability to establish and maintain working relationships with families and to continue developing knowledge and skills that demonstrate effective practices. Professionals often engage in practices that are based on personal beliefs as well as community values causing them to maintain a range of varying practices across various school districts, classrooms, and agencies (Graue & Marsh, 1996). Varying practices without a strong foundation is confusing to both professionals and families because it leads to inconsistent identification of children's strengths and needs as well as program planning.

Rationale For Using Play-Based Programming

Although ECSE must remain flexible due to the inherent nature of community diversity and individualized services, special education program models should provide a continuous framework for serving children in a way that acknowledges the whole child consistently. The literature provides increasing evidence that models emphasizing play-based programming offer an avenue for professionals to actively engage in creative problem solving in order to expand intervention and curricular opportunities for all children within a generally accepted format. Children's play and adult support of play are strongly supported by the DAP guidelines discussed in the next section. These guidelines emphasize the avenue of child's play as vital to child growth and development and the most natural avenue in which children practice and spontaneously demonstrate their development (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Moreover, play offers a flexible yet familiar structure for families and professionals to observe and facilitate whole child development while embracing diverse child characteristics and contexts (for examples see Jones & Reynolds, 1995; Linder, 1993a & b; McCord, 1995).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice Applies To All Children

Acknowledgement of the whole child with delayed, disabled and/or disordered development involves recognizing child and family characteristics beyond deficits or milestones of development in specific domains. The whole child concept recognizes that children develop across domains and within the contexts of culturally relevant environments and family routines. Discussions of recommended practices for educating or serving the needs of children typically refer to developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). DAP is defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) in their position statement and guidelines regarding recommended early childhood (EC) practices. ECSE guidelines are consistent with DAP (National

Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC/CEC) & National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), 1996). The concept of DAP is based on three interrelated, guiding components reflecting the field's current knowledge and shared beliefs about attributes of high-quality early childhood programming and are inclusive of all children. DAP includes 1) age-related characteristics of development (age appropriateness), 2) individual variations of strengths, interests, and needs (individual appropriateness), and 3) knowledge of social and cultural (sociocultural) contexts of children and their families (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Characteristics of practices considered developmentally appropriate include age appropriateness, interactive learning and teaching, and curricular activities individualized to emphasize child-initiation and independence (Bredekamp, 1993). Age appropriateness is based on expected sequences of growth and change typically related to chronological age. Beyond age-related expectations, the age appropriateness concept provides a framework for identifying sequentially identifiable mastered and emerging thinking and developmental skills to aid in preparing reasonably challenging materials, interactions and activities to children. Individual appropriateness recognizes each child with unique internal and external characteristics including pattern and timing of growth, strengths, needs and interests. Knowledge of each child's social and cultural contexts ensures relevance and respectfulness of children and their families when planning activities and facilitating learning experiences (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In addition to the three guiding components, child-initiated, child-directed, teacher-supported play is considered an essential component of DAP because play is a "primary vehicle for and indicator of" children's learning and development (Bredekamp, 1987, p. 3).

The premise of DAP and incorporating children's play is simple, but the application in actual practice is complex. The DAP premise is simple in that only three components (i.e., age appropriate, individually appropriate and sociocultural relevance) provide general guidance for practice to recognize sequential development along with the quality of development and surrounding environments. The DAP premise is complex in that a wide range of practices is required to meet individual and culturally diverse needs within a developmentally sequential framework. Consequently, daily efforts of individual practitioners may or may not be consistent with current guidelines or knowledge of typical and atypical development of children's play. An intervention plan, even one that claims developmentally appropriate activities, cannot provide the art incorporating and facilitating children's spontaneous play. When working with children that are eligible for ECSE services, professionals must demonstrate an ability to facilitate and skillfully intervene to support existing family and community situations while embracing opportunities to support child, family and even professional development of new knowledge and skills.

Structures To Support Child Learning And Development

Regardless of philosophies and professional practices, early childhood curricular activities typically involve some level of play. Play creates an opportunity for social exchanges between young children and adults as well as between their peers and siblings creating the groundwork for developing social competence (Bricker & Cripe, 1992; Bondurant-Utz & Luciano, 1994; Cooper, 1996). Play is also the avenue of development that typically exists in the home and school setting giving more opportunity to extend strategies and activities across environments for continuity and consistency. Individualized planning for children with delays, disorders and/or disabilities has been typical of practices within Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), but systematic use of child-initiated, adult-supported play activity has been limited. This limited use in ECSE situations is in spite of studies that identify the value of play for all children (for examples see Goodman, 1992; Safford, Spodek & Saracho, 1994). Marchant and Brown (1996) recognize play as an avenue for including children with developmental delays in environments with children considered to have typical development. These authors emphasize a balanced use of strategies in relation to a continuum based on play strategies to include nondirected play, guided play and directed play.

Peters, Neisworth and Yawkey (1985) refer to a similar balanced use of strategies to prepare a supportive learning environment for young children. They identify three structures for preparing the environment. A free discovery structure is one in which the adult provides materials and opportunities for children to choose, explore, discover and learn independently. A prompted discovery structure incorporates strategies in which the teacher makes specific props and materials available related to learning goals. Finally, the directed discovery structure is one in which the teacher guides child observations by presenting specific materials, preparing steps, asking questions and posing problems to help children meet objectives related to content or goals. Although each structure has differentiating qualities, the use of each should be balanced in the environment and integrated within activities to meet child learning, communication and social goals.

Beliefs About Children's Play

The unity and flexibility that a play-based structure provides allow professionals and parents to develop new knowledge and skills at an individual pace from various initial knowledge and skill levels. A recent study found that although a group of early childhood parents and professional respondents prefer particular types of structures for organizing child activities, all value play as an important component of supporting child development and learning (Pinson, 1998). The results of this study indicate that four beliefs about early childhood programming practices are described in relation to how play is used within each structure. The beliefs in the study were interpreted as Work - Play is the Child's Work in the Environment, Responsible - Play is Responsibly Structured, Expression - Play is Spontaneous Expression of Development and Learning, and Social - Play is Social Interaction. One way of structuring play might be through the perspective of people holding the Work belief suggesting that prompted discovery guides children to achieve self-directed milestone and pre-academic skill development as accomplished through play with toys and materials. Although people expressing this point of view presumably believe that intelligence is demonstrated in the ability to master pre-academic skills, they are likely to assume that children do not learn the skills directly from adults, but are likely to occasionally provide individual help if children need to feel successful. Perhaps another way of preparing for children's play is through the viewpoint of people who believe that play should be Responsible suggesting that children require directed discovery structures and adult involvement to participate in predetermined activities. Although the child learning processes expected might seem unclear to others, people who apply strategies from a Responsible point of view probably assume that the child's participation in the activity is the child's learning. People who behave from a point of view related to the Expression belief presumably merge learning, assessment and teaching/intervention strategies with play to balance the use of free, prompted and directed discovery structures. In application, they might balance the use of the structures by considering the quality of child interactions within individualized developmental growth goals. Still another perspective reflecting Social beliefs might expect children to take turns and share through the direction of adults by as they explore and create through free discovery play without adult involvement.

The emergence of four beliefs rather than the possible expectation of only three to reflect the three individual teaching structures, cause us to further examine the views represented in the Expression belief emphasizing play as the structure from which to implement various teaching strategies. Behaviors that tend to reflect an Expression point of view appear to be consistent with skills needed to provide a balanced application of teaching methods appropriate to individual child and group situations as listed by Peters, Neisworth and Yawkey (1985). The Expressed behaviors revealed in this study that reflect a balanced use of strategies include:

1. Play provides a skeletal structure from which to prepare an environment to support child learning and development,
2. Spontaneous play reflects individual child mastered and emerging developmental processes and skills to guide objectives within the environment,

3. Using play to assess the quality of child interactions (i. e., initiations, motivations and engagement) leads to effective decisions in the choice of teaching or intervention strategies,

4. A play structure is flexible in nature allowing for expansions and adaptations as needed to support child engagement and interactions.

Researchers involved with play-based models indicate that individual beliefs about early childhood program expectations and the value of play will affect the perceived usefulness and strategy implementation by professionals (for examples see Fromberg, 1995; Klugman, 1996). The respondents reflecting the Expression belief both participated in play-based training and program activities based on the Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment/Intervention (Linder, 1993a & b) and Storybook Journey Curriculum (McCord, 1995) models. Although pre-testing is not available to determine the effects of the play-based training and program activities on respondents representing the Expression belief consideration of the in-depth exposure to play-based models is warranted. This consideration in conjunction with the consensus between beliefs that play is educationally valuable to children may provide a key to supporting professional and parent development of the skills necessary to expand teaching/intervention strategies to adequately address child and situational diversity.

Examples Of Play-Based Programming Models

Two play-based programming models prepared to meet this task are Linder's (1993a & b) Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment/Intervention (TPBA/I) and McCord's (1995) Storybook Journey Curriculum (SJC). Together these models provide comprehensive information regarding play and general child development, environmental design and adult facilitation of children who are considered to have typical development as well as children with atypical development (i.e., delays, disabilities, disorders, advanced, etc.). They provide in-depth resources for professionals to actively develop skills in observation of children's play, the use of play facilitation strategies and a curriculum planning process, which embraces children at varying levels and with unique differences. More importantly the models can be incorporated as needed to support interactive parent and community child settings to provide programming that actively supports and encourages children from diverse cultures, families, and situations. Combining the TPBA/I and SJC models as a framework for EC programming provides activities in the use of facilitation strategies that are consistent with DAP and the previously described continuum of teaching structures (i. e., free, prompted and directed discovery).

The play-based programming emphasizes curriculum and intervention planning around the scope and sequence of children's play and development listed in the Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment (TPBA) (Linder, 1993a) under the four domains of cognitive, communication, social-emotional and sensorimotor to ensure developmentally appropriate practices. This means that age appropriateness is addressed when each child is identified at a particular sequence based on his/her mastery as demonstrated by spontaneous play behaviors. Then individual appropriateness and sociocultural relevance are addressed through the interventions in Transdisciplinary Play-Based Interventions (TPBI) (Linder, 1993b) and curricular activities in the Storybook Journey Curriculum (SJC) (McCord, 1995). The flexibility of the interventions and in choosing children's literature (i. e., storybooks, poems, songs, etc.) invites an educated yet creative level of family-professional collaboration to provide support for children's unique development patterns and cultural situations. The combined TPBA/I and SJC Models provide a comprehensive framework for assessment, intervention and curriculum using the umbrella of six different categories/levels of play.

Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment/Intervention (TPBA/I)

The categories/levels of play, listed below, are considered within an environment prepared with free, prompted and directed discovery activities to facilitate the ability of children to conceptualize, organize and act out developmental skills and learning without modeling or prompting by others. The author states, "When children are engaging in play, they are functioning close to their optimal

developmental level" (Linder, 1993, p. 4). In order to identify the skills that children have mastered and determine those skills that they are ready to learn, or emerging skills for which interventions can be planned, the child's primary category of play and interest area is identified. Even though children move through the categories sequentially associated with expected age ranges, the categories are also dynamic in that children incorporate lower levels of play as they acquire new skills in relating objects and thinking in more abstract terms. The categories/levels of play listed below are adapted from the books and institute of the TPBA/I Model and can be assessed and facilitated using existing materials in a variety of settings.

1. Exploratory/sensorimotor play typically develops and expands during the 0 to 24-month age range. The child engages in an activity simply for the enjoyment of the physical sensation. Repetitive movements, noises or gross motor activity are typical of this category (e. g., blowing raspberries, repetitive pouring, climbing up & down steps).

2. Relational/Functional play is expected to develop over the 9 – 24-month range. The child uses objects in play for the purposes they were intended. This level of play leads the child into the exploration of interrelationships among objects & events and encourages development of skills needed in dramatic play, the development of spatial, causal & categorical relations.

3. Constructive play skills typically begin to develop around 24 - 36 months and expand qualitatively throughout the preschool years. The child manipulates objects for the purpose of constructing or creating something. The child has an end goal in mind that requires transformation of objects into a new configuration. True construction is not seen unless a structure is created.

4. Dramatic play activities develop during the 21 - 72 month range.
The child pretends to do something or be someone with objects, without objects or through inanimate objects such as toy characters. Between 2 to 4 years play becomes more elaborate with complex combinations and the ability to plan events and roles. The activities develop from the representational level beginning around 11 - 12 months in which children represent something seen by their actions to the symbolic level in which children represent something in the world with ideas not using the real object.

5. Games with rules typically begin around 60+ months. This involves children having shared expectations and a willingness to conform to agreed-upon procedures with an existing or made-up game. The child must have a social understanding of roles in games, a concept of competition (winning and loosing), persistence and recognizing that the rules or guidelines remain the same from situation to situation.

6. Rough and tumble play develops around 36 months and continues to 48-60 months. This type of play involves boisterous and physical activity with two or more individuals done in a playful manner. This involves social boundary setting and is not the same as aggression.

Identifying the primary category of a child's spontaneous play rather than adult-chosen and directed activity is important to determining child strengths such as the level and functional use of specific skill mastery, length of attention span, and a willingness to initiate, persist and master various tasks and social interactions. Observation of these child play qualities provides vital clues to professionals and parents planning interventions with the expectation of child engagement and progress related to specific developmental goals and objectives. The six-stage TPBA process occurs over a one to one-and-a-half hour session with parents and professionals present. The session includes unstructured play, structured play, peer interaction, parent-child interaction, motor and snack. The assessment process emphasizes child spontaneity and direction, but provides opportunities and guiding questions to observe child responses to activities, adults and peers. Opportunities also exist to observe and assess the child's response to various interventions demonstrated by parents and professionals. For example, if a child with delayed communication skills is more conversational while playing with dolls than when naming pictures presented by an adult, intervention ideas should consider ways to structure doll play with peers or adults who model language the child is likely to imitate and develop.

A powerful advantage of the TPBA/I Model is that parent participation is systematically built-in to the process. Parent participation includes: natural play interactions, information exchange with professionals regarding typical and atypical child development and discussions of unique child and family qualities within the comfortable framework of child's play and family routines. Natural play interactions between the parent and child during a portion of the play assessment session allows professionals to support and encourage enriching family interactions. Information exchange with the professional team regards typical and atypical developmental sequences and expectations in relation to the child's and family's unique qualities and are not limited to age milestone expectations or child limitations. This information exchange helps to clarify parent concerns and priorities within the discussions between family members and professionals, which in turn ensures identification of typical home behaviors that are consistent or inconsistent with assessment and school behaviors.

Within this play-based framework, therapists (i.e., speech-language pathologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists and psychologists) combine integrated, direct and/or consultation services to other therapists, teachers, child developmental specialists and parents. This consultation role includes facilitating the planning and intervention process to support play activities and daily routines that encourage specific skill development or accommodations within the framework of each child's overall quality and sequence of development. Integration of therapy interventions with teacher or caregiver support in an EC setting and parent support at home theoretically and practically encourages each child to generalize learned behaviors to various settings and situations. Forms are provided to plan ways to integrate interventions in the home within family routine activities as well as within community child settings.

Storybook Journey Curriculum (SJC)

The Storybook Journey Curriculum (SJC) process stimulates creativity among adults and provides a structure for designing activities relative to child intervention and developmental needs (McCord, 1995). McCord explains the process of curriculum planning, environmental design and developmental implications of using this play and literacy-based curriculum that can be adapted to home, school or other child settings. The planning process of SJC begins by selecting and reading a story so that team members know the story well. Team members consist of any combination of parents, teachers, therapists and other professionals or family members that contribute unique ideas and expertise. Even children may want to contribute. The team then brainstorms activity ideas that will "bring the story to life" (McCord, 1995, p. 6) within the arrangement of typically expected EC centers and play activities. The team maps out a weekly (or longer) plan in which the story is read daily to the children and activities are designed to invite play through story-related concepts and themes. The model provides a flexible, but concrete structure to encourage child spontaneous and teacher facilitated play in which children develop cognitive, communication, social-emotional and sensorimotor processes and skills. The developmental implications of this creative, yet substantial curriculum structure built on children's literature include the following:

1. The Rhythm of the Words provides an opportunity for children to play with the sounds of their language through simple sounds, verses and songs that lull children into listening. The adult can use clapping, knee tapping, drumbeats or other instruments to accentuate the rhythm of words (use of our ears & bodies) or combine large motor movement with words to enhance the rhythm and speech connection.
2. Repetition for Mastery ensures that children experience a story in many different forms with exposure over time so that the story becomes a scaffold on which children can build knowledge. Children need various modalities to internalize and master the elements of a story rather than repetitious drill. For example, repeat the words of the story using sand play, flannel boards, puppets, dramatic play, art, etc.
3. Predictability supports children's mastery of a story, providing a safe way to participate in related play activities.
4. Sequencing of Stories should start with simple, repetitive stories and move on in complexity

when children are ready as demonstrated by ability & temperament (e. g., some prefer long, complex stories while others attend for only short periods). Long stories can be simplified through puppets or storytelling, so that children can have a common experience with the story. In addition, acknowledging the beginning, middle and ending parts of books helps children master sequencing concepts and to order the story from memory, even expanding on the details.

5. Thematic Confidence allows children to create spontaneous reenactments or guided experience during group time with other children providing an avenue for increased confidence in moving from self to others within the story's theme.

6. Practicing Narrative Discourse of the stories becomes a scaffold or framework to support children's attempts to relate to each other and adults. Stories give children practice in communicating with each other as they act out what they know and remember or improvise about the events or concepts.

7. Basic Vocabulary Building occurs when the adult is sure to pause while reading to give children the opportunity to clarify what they do not understand. Relating vocabulary to children's experiences insures that the meaning is relevant and its use is natural.

8. Expanding World Knowledge Through Schema & Scripts provides more information and experiences for children creating a stronger foundation for constructing a comprehension of the world. They can build on personal knowledge and experiences.

9. Providing the Stage for Creative Extensions allows children to use an existing story line as a springboard to practice the story form in different ways encouraging them to become more adventuresome. The process evolves slowly from the adult telling them stories to children telling the adult stories to children writing their stories down.

10. Peer Interaction/Socialization is inspired with the story as the connecting link because the story line is the common thread that connects children with their peers and adults in socialization, acceptance & meaningful interaction. The story line provides peer camaraderie, sharing of a common topic and a focus for discussion to encourage social conversation.

11. Environmental Components include centers typically expected for young children and their play activities designed to meet a wide range of developmental levels and needs. The environment must provide realistic story props to help children organize the perceptual space needed to reenact a story line. Yet children ready to use imagined or symbolic props may reenact the story in other parts of the room, not needing realistic props.

12. Family/Community Partnerships/Links to Home provide an opportunity for adults and older children in the family and the community to model the importance of reading, writing and communication. Activities might include participation of family members, community friends and professionals sharing their interests, hobbies and professions and how reading and writing affect their jobs or just their fun.

Conclusion

Professional ECSE practices must be based on intense knowledge of typical and atypical child development, strategies to facilitate and encourage child growth and communications inviting active family participation. The advantages of implementing play-based models for building family-professional relationships and developing new professional knowledge and skills in urban or suburban districts extend into the rural setting. A particular advantage includes the ability to use existing materials and settings within rural communities and homes to assess, plan and implement activities in collaboration with family input and skills. In addition, observing spontaneous child behaviors and strengths leads to professional-family discussions rather than professional reports on areas of concern and expected development. Professionals and family members who engage with a child in play provide an opportunity to demonstrate interactions with the child so that professionals learn about family expectations, beliefs, skills and needs. In turn, play-based programming provides a framework in which continuous and consistent practices allow professionals to convey useful information to parents in simple terms related to the child's natural home and/or community play and routine activities (Linder, 1993a & b; Nourot, 1995). Intervention and curricular recommendations become a direct result of this family-professional interaction in which ideas

to facilitate child mastered and emerging skills are created together with support for family strengths and needs. By accessing models that emphasize child's play to guide professionals and parents in supporting each child's sequential and unique developmental qualities, a solid framework is provided from which to build more continuous practices consistent with developmentally appropriate practices for all children.

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