

Sharing the Science: From the Lab to the Classroom

or why we write books for audiences beyond the academy

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...we support the critical importance of self-directed learning and play as the essential pedagogical strategy for young children, the *sine qua non* of high-quality early childhood education (Kagan & Lowenstein, 2004, p.71).

How would teachers, administrators, policy-makers at various levels and the lay public know about the importance of playful learning and the evidence for it if we did not share what we have learned from research? Writing for audiences outside our peers is crucial for bringing the science to where it really matters: practice. This is always true but is especially true in the present educational climate. Partially in response to No Child Left Behind, as well as to parents' anxieties for their children's future economic security, there is a movement in the United States to develop more academic preschools.

Exposure to reading and mathematics in preschool greatly enhances children's school readiness (Paris & Paris, 2006). That is clear. Yet, increasing curricular content does not dictate pedagogical approaches that create "preschool sweatshops." Learning and play are not incompatible; learning takes place when children are engaged and enjoying themselves (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003).

Edward Zigler of Yale University models for us all how researchers can use their findings as a guide to influencing educational policy. Zigler is the field's champion in this regard,

having contributed to the founding of Head Start, and to the important recognition that *whole* children come to school and not just their brains (Zigler, 2007). The Society for Research in Child Development's *Social Policy Report*, and now the Society's new journal, *Perspectives on Child Development*, represent our best efforts to bring the fruits of our collective research labors to the diverse fields in which they can be applied. Yet translation to policy is not simple. Jack Shonkoff (2000) outlined some of the challenges we face and a new edited collection by Melissa Welch-Ross and Lauren Fasig (2007) invites researchers to consider the skills and strategies needed to bring our science to bear on questions of policy.

Our latest book, *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool* (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009) is one example of the way in which we can speak to both our colleagues as well as to practitioners in areas like education and child development. Given the diversity of the research in developmental psychology, there are many issues that invite similar treatment.

This book grew out of a conference we organized at Yale University in the summer of 2005 called *PLAY=LEARNING*. The conference was our way of responding to the threats we saw to children's well-being. A huge gap was emerging between what our research told us about effective teaching and what was becoming a dominant pedagogical approach to preschool learning on the ground.

Just one week after the conference was announced, we had filled our 150 allotted spaces. Over 600 people -- teachers, parents, policy makers, children's media experts, and child-care workers -- had to be turned away. Why? Because, as their emails told us, they needed reassurance and support from us, the *research community*, that play matters in the lives of children and that playful learning is how young children learn best.

The conference produced an edited volume of the same name (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006). But a series of articles in an edited book falls short of a synthesized empirically-driven piece that speaks directly to wide audiences and offers policy implications. Practitioners and policy makers asked for a source that would celebrate the value of playful learning in this climate that increasingly supported drill-and-practice. They wanted to hear researchers' voices in the marketplace of informed opinion and ideas.

Unstructured play is often seen as a waste of time and parents increasingly consider interaction with didactic, electronic toys to be a form of play (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2008). Our new emphasis on academic readiness in preschool tends to put reading and math learning above mastery of social skills at exactly the time when we are learning about the importance of executive function skills and social/emotional regulation for academic growth (Barnett et al., 2008; Berk, 2001; Diamond, et. al., 2007).

Yet the evidence from the research suggests that eliminating play from children's lives increases children's stress, reduces attention and learning in classrooms (e.g., Pellegrini,

2005), results in an increase in preschool expulsions (Gilliam & Shabar, 2006), and causes children – especially boys -- to dislike school (Marcon, 1993; Tyre, 2008). Play and playful learning captivate children's minds in ways that support better academic (e.g., Singer & Bellin) and social outcomes (e.g., Berk, 2001) as well as strategies for lifelong learning. We seem to no longer appreciate that children learn mathematics through board games (Ramani & Sigler, 2008) and reading through story time (Hindman et al., 2008; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Wasik & Bond, 2001). Playful pedagogy has a long and deep research tradition that continually points to better outcomes for young children (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

The benefits of preschool education have now been heralded by President-Elect Obama, by our nation's governors, and by corporate boards. Having established *that* preschool education is important for school readiness, it is now incumbent upon us, researchers in the field, to use our best science to suggest *how* we should fashion our preschool pedagogy. Although it is not the only way that children learn, the research supports the view that free and guided play, as Kagan and Lowenstein (2004) argue, is “the essential pedagogical strategy for young children.” If we in the field don't convey this message, we leave a vacuum for policy to be made in the absence of the evidence.

*The citations used in this article can be found at [www.blah](http://www.blah.blah.edu) blah.edu.

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