

Dimensions

of Early Childhood

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**Rocking Out in Kindergarten:
Young Children's Playful Responses to Early Music Lessons**

**Haciendo música en el Kindergarten: Las respuestas lúdicas de los niños
pequeños a las experiencias con música durante la edad temprana**

Reconsidering the Place of Games with Rules in the Early Elementary Classroom

**Supporting Parents of Preschoolers with Disabilities:
An Investigation of Parents' Perceptions and Use of Formal and Informal Supports**

Early Childhood Play and Academics: What Are Parents' Perceptions?

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Editor: Wilma Robles-Melendez, PhD
Dimensions of Early Childhood

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Take Time to Recharge This Summer

Tomemos Tiempo Para Recargar Energías Este Verano

Judy Whitesell



Happy summer everyone! I hope this issue finds you happy and well. The theme of this issue of *Dimensions of Early Childhood* involves music, games, and play! What a wonderful way to provide experiences for young children! We know these experiences are vital in growth and development, and it's critical we convey this to parents and families. Music has the power to change our moods, bring joy, encourage movement, and soothe, all while building brain development. It also improves memory, grows language and literacy skills, encourages movement, and is FUN!

Play is equally important as that is the "work of the child" according to Piaget. Those who are not in education sometimes think play is the opposite of work. Again, we need to discourage that misconception. Play is a critical part of childhood. In play, children learn and understand the ways of the world, develop physical and social skills, feel loved and cared for and build confidence. Experiencing different types of play is also necessary to provide rich opportunities and changes over time as children age.

Intentional integration involving both music and play provides optimal learning activities.

I encourage you to share this issue of *Dimensions* with colleagues and the families of the children you serve. Let's be pro-active in promoting music, games, and play for all children.

¡Feliz verano a todos! Espero que al recibir este número te encuentres feliz y bien. El tema de este número de *Dimension* presenta temas sobre la música y el juego. ¡Qué maravillosa manera de proporcionar experiencias para los niños pequeños! Sabemos que estas experiencias son vitales para el crecimiento y el desarrollo y es fundamental que transmitamos este mensaje a los padres y las familias. La música tiene el poder de cambiar nuestros estados de ánimo, traer alegría, fomentar el movimiento o calmarnos a todos mientras construimos el desarrollo del cerebro. ¡También implica mejorar la memoria, desarrollar las habilidades lingüísticas y de alfabetización, fomenta el movimiento y la DIVERSIÓN!

El juego es igualmente importante ya que es el "trabajo del niño" según Piaget. Aquellos que no están en educación a veces piensan que el juego es lo opuesto al trabajo. Una vez más, tenemos que ayudar a clarificar esa forma de pensar. El juego es una parte crítica de la infancia. En el juego, los niños aprenden y entienden las formas del mundo, desarrollan habilidades físicas y sociales, se sienten amados y cuidados y desarrollan confianza. Experimentar diferentes tipos de juego también es necesario para proporcionar oportunidades ricas y cambios a lo largo del tiempo a medida que los niños crecen.

La integración intencional que involucra tanto música como juego proporciona actividades de aprendizaje óptimas. Los invito a compartir este número de *Dimensions* con sus colegas y las familias de los niños a los que sirven. Seamos proactivos en la promoción de la música y del juego para todos los niños.

In Memory of
Brian Michael LeJeune
by Dr. Janie Humphries



Let's Welcome Summer!;/¡Demos la bienvenida al verano!

Wilma Robles-Melendez, PhD

Summer is once again here and with that, there are many opportunities for children to enjoy and learn. The warmer weather is an invitation to play. With play, a multitude of learning experiences emerge for young children. Whether in the classroom or at home, play experiences are unique opportunities for children to build new ideas and gain new concepts while their development continues to unfold. This is a time, as well, to pause and reflect on our classroom and teaching practices and how to continue supporting children's learning. We know that it is your commitment and dedication to children what guides you. The articles in this issue are an invitation to reflect on how to continue supporting children's development and learning. They also invite you to consider the needs of families and parents. We hope that this summer will be a special time for you to enjoy!

los niños construyen nuevas ideas, adquieren nuevos conceptos y su desarrollo continúa desarrollándose. Este es un momento, también, para hacer una pausa y reflexionar sobre nuestras prácticas de clase y enseñanza y cómo continuar apoyando el aprendizaje de los niños. Sabemos que es tu compromiso y dedicación a los niños lo que guía tu trabajo con los niños. Mientras tomas tiempo durante este verano, esperamos que los artículos de este número sirvan como una invitación a reflexionar sobre cómo continuar apoyando el desarrollo y el aprendizaje de los niños y como atender y colaborar con las familias y los padres. ¡Esperamos que este verano sea uno para también disfrutar!

Una vez más, el verano está aquí y con este surgen muchas oportunidades para que los niños disfruten y aprendan. El clima más cálido es una invitación a jugar. Con el juego, surgen una multitud de experiencias de aprendizaje para los niños pequeños. Ya sea en el aula o en casa, los momentos para jugar son oportunidades únicas donde



The advertisement for FunShine Express features a background image of a child's hand using a colorful plastic mold to shape sand in a sandcastle. The text is overlaid on a white rectangular area. The logo consists of a sun icon and the text 'FunShine Express' with 'Early Learning Curricula' underneath. The main text reads 'Curriculum for ages 0-5 delivered to you!' followed by a list of benefits: 'Save lesson planning time', 'Create assessments', 'Aligned to early education standards', and 'Build family engagement'. At the bottom, the website 'funshineexpress.com' and phone number '1.800.340.8103' are provided. The bottom of the ad has a blue border with faint icons of educational tools like pencils and paper.

Rocking Out in Kindergarten: Young Children's Playful Responses to Early Music Lessons

Kristen Loughlin and Michael J. Bell



& King, 2012). Soprano ukuleles are about 20 inches in length, making them an appropriate size for the children in the study. They provide the opportunity for children to easily produce different pitches at varying volumes, yet have a high ceiling for musical potential.

The study had a dual purpose: to teach the children foundational music skills, and to teach them to read lyrics at the emergent reader level. Bolden & Beach (2021) suggest that reading prosody, or the ability to read with expression, is related to elements of musical expression. The changes in pitch, volume, and emphasis add

Introduction

Music is a shared creative experience for participants and listeners, a unity of minds and senses; there are few other opportunities for such joint participation, in which large numbers of people experience identical sensory input (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Individuals united in music-making possess a shared intentionality, an understanding of the intents and goals for the instruments they share (Ilari, 2016). While no two musical experiences are identical, engaging in music provides avenues for social bonding, playful exploration of movement and sound, and expression of emotions and ideas.

Young children's play experiences reveal their understanding of their world, their emotional security, happiness, creativity, and self-identity while they are fully immersed in daily experiences. Preschoolers, kindergarteners, and primary-grade children can take the most simple, mundane environments and materials, and turn them into playful experiences. Teachers of young children integrate play in lessons and activities to enhance motivation, foster fruitful learning experiences, and encourage joyful, curious dispositions among children (Scrabeck, 2020; Moon & Reifel, 2008).

Lesson Organization

During a five-week research study, a kindergarten class of 14 five- and six-year-old children learned to sing and play soprano ukuleles. The ukulele is a musical instrument of Portuguese origin, which the musician plays by plucking or strumming its four strings (Tranquada

meaning to the text, and are indicative of reading comprehension (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010). Considering the pitch, volume, and rhythm in music has the potential to enhance prosody (Bolden & Beach, 2021) and can therefore support accurate comprehension of texts (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010). Lessons in the study encouraged children to sing lyrics fluently with expression, and to comprehend their meaning.

Over a sequence of nine lessons, the children learned to play two chords on soprano ukuleles, and to play and sing four original songs. The songs grew more complex musically and lyrically as the lessons progressed. The first used only one chord, a combination of several notes played simultaneously. The lyrics consisted of two simple phrases. The final song required children to switch between two chords, the C Major chord and the A Minor chord, which are both combinations of notes produced with one finger pressed against a ukulele string. The lyrics of the final song told a complete narrative. The children were given the opportunity to perform for one another, as well as to perform for a wider audience at their kindergarten graduation ceremony.

Csikszentmihalyi (2009) cites one of the pitfalls of traditional music training, noting that often "too much emphasis is placed on how they perform, and too little on what they experience." (p. 112). While guided, formal music lessons are a successful route to mastery of an instrument, the lesson sequence in this study deemphasized the teacher's role and emphasized children's agency as music-makers. Mastery of

Some children enjoy performing for an audience, while others find joy in playing for themselves.

any skill is guided by play (Brown, 2010). Music instruction should allow opportunities for children to play with the creation and manipulation of sound, and to explore its purposes of communication, expression, and social connection.

Each child in this study showed a unique response to music, bringing their personalities and perspectives to the experience. Some children's play was internally oriented; others made music socially, using their voices and instruments as a means of communication. Some children enjoyed performing for an audience, while others found fulfillment in playing primarily for themselves. Through classroom observations, several themes in the children's interactions with musical instruments became evident. The behaviors of individual children suggest that making music is both a personal and social experience, one as unique and diverse as the children themselves. However, there were four "rockstars" whose musical experiences captured the classroom climate; their playful dispositions highlight ways in which children engage in musical play.

Observing Children at Play

Katherine: The Free Spirit

At the beginning of the lesson sequence, each child was given time to explore the ukulele prior to formal instruction from the teacher. Six-year-old Katherine¹ was initially reserved when presented with the ukulele. While many of her classmates immediately began to strum their ukuleles and sing with energy, Katherine was methodical in her exploration of the instrument. She examined it quietly and thoroughly, twisting the tuning pegs and plucking the individual strings. During each lesson, she grew more skillful; her strumming transformed from heavy and arrhythmic to light and consistent, and she could play both a C Major chord and an A Minor chord.

As her ability-level grew, Katherine appeared to change as well. The technical aspects of playing the ukulele became largely automatic, leaving her free to focus on musical expression. She began to strum with energy and joyful intensity, and her facial expressions became animated. She rocked from side to side, sang loudly and expressively, and often matched her body language to the song's tonality and the meaning of the lyrics; when playing an A Minor chord, which has a sad sound, and singing about a rainy day, Katherine slumped her shoulders and frowned.



While Katherine's performance was emotive and joyful, it appeared to be internally oriented. Her attention was not on the audience or her fellow musicians, but on her personal understanding and interaction with the music. The synergy of music that was increasingly challenging and Katherine's skillful performance created what Csikzentmihalyi (2009) describes as a state of "flow," or complete emotional, cognitive, and physical absorption in an enjoyable activity. As she became fully immersed in the experience, she appeared to transcend awareness of time, self, and the other children. While Katherine performed with exuberance and was entertaining for an audience to watch, doing so was not her intention; her focus was internal, and playing served to entertain primarily herself.

David: The Entertainer

David, six-years-old, started performing before the ukulele was even in his hands. When the teacher-researcher introduced the musical instrument and the purpose of the lessons, David stood up and began to play air-guitar in front of his classmates. Encouraged by their laughter, he danced and slid across the floor on his knees for a "grand finale." Throughout the lesson sequence, he was continually seeking an audience; the lessons were video recorded to collect data, and David often intentionally positioned himself in front of the camera while he played. He smiled and danced, and appeared more confident when his performance was met with laughter or applause. The interpersonal aspect of David's response suggests the role of musical experiences in social-emotional development. His choices were driven by social awareness of his classmates' feelings and reactions, a key competency of social-emotional learning.

In contrast to Katherine, David can be described as an externally-oriented performer. His focus was almost exclusively on his relationship with an audience, rather than his relationship with the

¹ All children's names are pseudonyms.



Music play invites children to explore and learn new ways of creative expression.

instrument or the music itself. His behavior made evident the value of an authentic performance experience for children; where many teachers may describe him as a “class clown” or his behavior as disruptive, allowing him to perform for his peers channeled his energy into a productive activity. When he performed at the kindergarten graduation ceremony, David functioned as a leader for the group; he smiled and strummed with energy, and nodded at his classmates who were doing the same. His energy appeared contagious; while watching him bounce and sing, the other children mirrored his behavior.

David’s performance highlights the value of music as a unifier; the class was more cohesive when they were laughing and making music together, or mimicking David’s energetic strum. Molnar-Szakacs, Green Assuied, and Overy (2012) suggest that an emotional and communicative link, or a Shared Affective Motion Experience, is created among individuals during musical interaction. The same neural networks can be activated in both musicians and listeners, facilitating social bonding and empathy (Molnar-Szakacs, Green Assuied, & Overy, 2012). When David bounced while strumming his ukulele, or dropped to his knees to play the air-guitar, the classroom climate changed; the children shared his playful spirit and humor.

Xavier: The Innovator

As soon as the ukulele was introduced, five-year-old Xavier began asking questions: “What happens if I twist these white things? What are those lines for? Why do the strings sound different?” Throughout the lesson sequence, he questioned existing conventions and proposed new ways of using the instrument. For example, he asked why left-handed people still had to strum the strings with their right hand, then decided to flip the ukulele upside down to try strumming with his left hand. After learning how to play a C Major chord, Xavier began to invent his own chords using new combinations of finger positions. He tried holding the ukulele in his lap, behind his back, or flat on the floor while strumming, and explored how these changes influenced the instrument’s sound.

new methods of playing the ukulele, and challenged existing conventions. He also modeled novel ideas for other children, who imitated his methods; it was common to see Xavier teaching other children the chords he had invented.

Play often involves breaking rules and having fun while doing so (Bateson & Martin, 2013). While no professional ukulele player would commend Xavier’s technique or sound while he twisted the tuning pegs to create dissonant chords, strummed the ukulele upside down, or turned the strings to face his body rather than outward, his actions suggest the ability to think flexibly, fluently, and originally. These are tenets of creativity—to be flexible in one’s thinking, to switch fluently between different approaches, and to generate novel ideas (Runco, Noble, Reiter-Palmon, Acar, Ritchie & Yurkovich, 2011). Xavier’s experience was one of innovation and exploration, and filled with questions of “What if...?” and “I wonder what would happen if I tried...?” He demonstrated music as a creative and playful pursuit, motivated by a quest for discovery.

Maria: The Storyteller

Throughout the study, the children were encouraged to consider both the meaning of the lyrics and the emotional impact of the music. The songs included variations in tempo, tonality, and lyrical subject matter, and the children discussed how these elements interact to create meaning. Six-year-old Maria went beyond merely understanding this concept; she became immersed in storytelling, using music and movement to create and express meaning.

Storytelling is a skill and an art form children use to express themselves, and which children admire in one another. Paley (2005) expresses that “children are intoxicated by the seemingly endless supply of plots available just for the thinking” (p. 26). Young children develop auditory abilities, thinking, and language, and storytelling is a key element in fostering language development (Isik, 2016). Music can unify several

communication forms; it links storytelling, performing, moving, and playing an instrument (Krüger, 2007). Maria used her facial expressions, her body movements, her voice, and her ukulele to tell a story as she performed. Below are the lyrics to one of songs the children learned, entitled “Little Sid.”

Little Sid ©Loughlin

I knew a boy so tiny
They called him Little Sid.
He wanted to learn music,
So, this is what he did.

First, he tried the banjo,
But his hands were too small.
Next, he tried the tuba,
But it was way too tall.

He found the ukulele
After many tries.
Not too big for Little Sid.
It was just his size!

These lyrics contain a clear narrative. However, Maria’s performance extended the meaning within the text into a meaning she herself created. When singing the lyrics, “first, he tried the banjo,” she strummed her ukulele loudly and energetically, smiling and rocking side to side. Then, while singing, “but his hands were too small,” she began to play quietly. Her facial expression fell and her shoulders drooped. She then acted reinvigorated while singing the lyrics, “next, he tried the tuba,” acting out the emotions of someone who has been discouraged but is persevering. Her behavior shows empathy with the character of Little Sid, and an ability to convey those emotions to an audience.

Maria was also notable in her interactions with another child, Taylor. Maria and Taylor performed as a pair, often improvising and inventing their own lyrics in between formal sessions. Bjerstedt (2014) writes that “improvisations, then, are essentially communicative...most improvisations are also the results of collective efforts” to share stories among performers and, when present, an audience (p. 53). The two young musicians found their own meaning, communicating and sharing narratives through movement and song. This is the heart of storytelling; to feel and to find meaning, and to share that meaning with someone else.

Brown (2009) states that “play is called recreation because it makes us new again; it re-creates us and our world” (p. 127). While none of these children had an identical experience, each engaged in play that was both individually and collectively meaningful. They created meaning both within themselves and the world in which they learn and play, using music to explore emotion, to connect with an audience, to innovate, and to tell stories. Each of these children demonstrate a unique interaction with music and their instrument. Yet, they were all engaged in a way that was personally meaningful, both as individuals and as a group. Teachers of young children are encouraged to honor individual interpretations and expressions during music experi-

ences. Music proved to unify the children as one community while providing freedom to express their individual differences.

Musical Play in Your Classroom

Getting Started

Teachers wishing to encourage musical play in young children can begin by creating an environment conducive to playful, guided discovery. Small-group settings are most effective for music instruction; young children can interact socially throughout guided lessons, while not becoming overwhelmed or distracted by many other children and instruments. Teaching in a small group also allows the teacher to provide more individualized guidance, which is useful in the early stages—skills such as finger placement on the ukulele, instrument handling, and strumming often require a higher level of teacher assistance when students are first learning. Small groups of three to five children allow for social play and peer-led discovery, while supported by their teacher.

Ukuleles are also recommended as instruments for this age-group. They are pitched instruments (as opposed to drums, maracas, and other percussion instruments, which only produce rhythms), allowing children to experiment with different aspects of sound production. Children hear changes in pitch in their voices while singing, and can explore how to create similar pitch changes on a hand-held instrument. The smaller size and shape of the ukulele also makes it appropriate for use by young children; it fits easily into small hands and the strings are a short distance apart. Chords can be played with as few as one finger.

Guided Discovery in Musical Play

Instruction should begin with a period of guided discovery, during which children will explore the musical instruments in both structured and unstructured, playful contexts. First, allow children to examine the instrument and explore its capabilities. Encourage them to make sounds they find pleasant and those they find unpleasant, and to discover what causes the change between them. This period can and should be social; children enjoy sharing their methods with one another, and doing so can make way for new discoveries. The novelty of the instrument makes necessary this exploratory period; to eventually learn how to play the instrument in conventional ways, children must first experiment with how sound is created. Children such as Xavier and Katherine, the creators or free spirits, will find unstructured discovery especially rewarding.

Following this unstructured time, invite children to share their findings. What observations can they make about the instrument? What sounds were they able to make—and can they demonstrate them? Encourage and celebrate the sounds and discoveries the children make—even those that may sound less conventionally pleasing to the ear. Doing so builds students’ self-concept as musicians and encourages innovation and creativity. It also fosters a risk-free and nurturing environment, one that will be conducive to all kinds of play and learning.

After children have explored the instruments on their own, a more structured introduction can occur. The teacher should model conventional handling of the instrument, using musical vocabulary

alongside child-friendly definitions (i.e., “I put my fingers on the neck of the ukulele—that’s the part that is long and thin. Can you find the neck of your ukulele?”). Children need not master this vocabulary, but repeated teacher modeling can help them to more effectively communicate their ideas during social play. During this modeling, it may be useful to have students take turns demonstrating musical skills alongside the teacher; for example, after the teacher has modeled how to strum the instrument, the teacher may select a child volunteer to lead his or her peers in practicing the strum.

During this guided discovery, the children will benefit from instruction in skills such as holding the instruments, strumming, and keeping a steady beat. Later in the lesson sequence, once these fundamentals have been mastered, the concept of chords can be introduced. Begin introducing chords by playing different sounding chords, either on the ukulele or with a pre-recorded music segment, and instruct children to change their movements as the music changes. This activity helps children learn to differentiate between different sounds; draw their attention to changes in pitch, as well as other observations about the music. Then, explain how these different sounds are made using chords.

Personal Creative Expression & Group Play

After both unstructured and structured time to explore the musical instruments, children can engage in creative expression as they learn songs, both personally and in a group. The selected songs should be brief, melodically simple, and use only one or two chords. Children may benefit from first learning to sing the lyrics and melody. Project the lyrics for children to see, and model fluent reading while pointing to each word, particularly for children in an emergent literacy stage; doing so helps to solidify the concept of one-to-one correspondence and helps children develop word recognition. Lyrics and the melody may be taught using rote learning, having children repeat after the teacher or a peer leader.

Conclusion

The children described in this article demonstrated four unique and deeply personal interpretations of musical play experiences. Musical play can serve internal and external goals as children engage with quality musical instruments designed to create beautiful sounds. The role of the teacher should be to identify how children approach musical play—whether as an entertainer, a storyteller, or something entirely unexpected—and nurture the creative expression that occurs in play. The long-standing body of professional knowledge about play and playful approaches to learning supports appropriate and effective music experiences for young children. Provide opportunities for children to explore music in guided or unstructured playful situations to engage in musical social play. Select the best-quality instruments available, incorporate songs with lyrics that are meaningful, culturally diverse, and relevant, as well as supporting young children’s literacy. Children are capable of incredibly deep creative expression during musical play. Early childhood professionals need only provide appro-

appropriate support and playful environments for them to explore, play, learn, and, of course, make music.

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Haciendo música en el Kindergarten: Las respuestas lúdicas de los niños pequeños a las experiencias con música durante la edad temprana

Kristen Loughlin y Michael J. Bell



La música es una experiencia creativa compartida al igual con participantes y oyentes, en una unidad de mentes y sentidos; y donde hay algunas otras oportunidades para tal participación conjunta, en la que un gran número de personas experimentan una similar experiencia sensorial (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Las personas que participan en la creación musical comparten su intencionalidad, comprenden su finalidad y objetivos de los instrumentos que comparten (Ilari, 2016). Si bien no hay dos experiencias musicales que sean idénticas, participar en la música proporciona vías para la vinculación social, la exploración lúdica del movimiento y el sonido, y la expresión de emociones e ideas.

Las experiencias de juego de los niños pequeños revelan su comprensión de su mundo, su seguridad emocional, felicidad, creatividad, identidad propia mientras están completamente inmersos en las experiencias diarias. Los niños en edad preescolar, kindergarten y niños de primaria pueden hacer uso de lo que hay en sus entornos y materiales más simples y comunes, y convertirlos en experiencias lúdicas. Los maestros de niños pequeños integran el juego en

las lecciones y actividades para apoyar la motivación, fomentar experiencias de aprendizaje fructíferas y fomentar disposiciones alegres y curiosas entre los niños (Scrabeck, 2020; Luna y Reifel, 2008).

Organizando las lecciones

Durante un estudio de investigación de cinco semanas, una clase de kindergarten con 14 niños de cinco y seis años aprendió a cantar y tocar los ukeleles soprano. El ukelele es un instrumento musical de origen portugués, que el músico utiliza ya sea tocando o rasgueando sus cuatro cuerdas (Tranquada & King, 2012). Los ukeleles soprano miden aproximadamente veinte pulgadas de

largo, lo que los convierte en un tamaño apropiado para los niños en el estudio. Los mismos proporcionan una oportunidad para que los niños produzcan fácilmente diferentes tonos a diferentes volúmenes, ofreciendo espacio para demostrar el potencial musical.

El estudio realizado tenía un doble propósito: enseñar a los niños habilidades musicales fundamentales y enseñarles a leer letras a nivel de lector emergente. Según Bolden y Beach (2021) estos sugieren que la prosodia de lectura, o la capacidad de leer con expresión, está relacionada con elementos de expresión musical. Los cambios en el tono, el volumen y el énfasis agregan significado al texto y son indicativos de la comprensión lectora (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010). Considerar el tono, el volumen y el ritmo en la música tiene el potencial de mejorar la prosodia (Bolden & Beach, 2021) y, por lo tanto, puede apoyar una comprensión más precisa de los textos (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010). En las lecciones que se llevaron a cabo en el estudio se animó a los niños a cantar las letras con fluida expresión y a comprender su significado.



Durante una serie de nueve lecciones, los niños aprendieron a tocar dos acordes en ukeleles soprano, así como a tocar y cantar cuatro canciones originales. Las canciones se hicieron más complejas musical y líricamente a medida que avanzaban las lecciones. Primero, se usaba sólo un acorde, es decir, una combinación de varias notas o sonidos tocados simultáneamente. La letra de las canciones consistía en dos frases simples. La canción final requería que los niños cambiaran entre dos acordes; el acorde de do mayor y el acorde de la menor, que son combinaciones de notas producidas con un dedo presionado contra una cuerda de ukelele. La letra de la canción final narraba un relato completo. A los niños se les ofreció la oportunidad de actuar unos para otros, así como de actuar para un público más amplio en su ceremonia de graduación de kindergarten.

Csikszentmihalyi (2009) señala uno de los obstáculos en la formación musical tradicional de los niños, indicando que a menudo “se pone demasiado énfasis en cómo se desempeñan, y muy poco en lo que ellos experimentan” (pág. 112). Si bien las lecciones de música guiadas y formales son una ruta exitosa hacia el dominio de un instrumento, la secuencia de lecciones en este estudio puso menos atención en el papel del maestro y enfatizó la capacidad agentiva de los niños como creadores de música. El dominio de cualquier habilidad es guiado por el juego (Brown, 2010). La instrucción musical debe permitir oportunidades para que los niños jueguen con la creación y manipulación del sonido, y exploren los propósitos de comunicación, expresión y conexión social que posee la música y el sonido.

Cada niño en este estudio mostró una respuesta única a la música, aportando sus personalidades y perspectivas a la experiencia. Algunos juegos infantiles estaban orientados internamente; otros hacían música socialmente, usando sus voces e instrumentos como medio de comunicación. Algunos niños disfrutaron actuando para una audiencia, mientras que otros encontraron satisfacción en jugar principalmente para ellos mismos. A través de las observaciones en el aula, varios temas en las interacciones de los niños con los instru-

mentos musicales se hicieron evidentes. Los comportamientos de los niños individuales sugieren que hacer música es una experiencia tanto personal como social, una experiencia tan única y diversa como los propios niños. Sin embargo, hubo cuatro “estrellas de rock” cuyas experiencias musicales capturaron el clima del aula; sus disposiciones lúdicas dejaron ver claramente las maneras en que los niños participan en el juego musical.

Observando a los niños jugando

Katherine: El Espíritu Libre

Al comienzo de la secuencia de lecciones, a cada niño se le ofreció tiempo para explorar el

ukelele antes de la instrucción formal del maestro. Katherine¹, una niña de seis años, fue inicialmente muy reservada cuando se le presentó el ukelele. Mientras que muchos de sus compañeros de clase inmediatamente comenzaron a rasguear sus ukeleles y cantar con energía, Katherine fue metódica en su exploración del instrumento. Lo examinó en silencio y a fondo, girando las clavijas de afinación y tocando las cuerdas individuales. Durante cada lección, se volvió más hábil; su rasgueo se transformó de pesado y arrítmico a ligero y consistente, y podía tocar tanto un acorde de do mayor como un acorde de la menor.

A medida que su nivel de habilidad progresó, Katherine también pareció cambiar. Los aspectos técnicos de tocar el ukelele se volvieron en gran medida automáticos, dejándola libre para centrarse en la expresión musical. Comenzó a rasguear con energía e intensidad alegre, y sus expresiones faciales se animaron. Katherine se mecía de lado a lado, cantaba fuerte y expresivamente, y a menudo combinaba su lenguaje corporal con la tonalidad de la canción y el significado de la letra, tocando un acorde de La menor, cuyo sonido es triste, y al cantar sobre un día lluvioso, Katherine bajó los hombros y frunció el ceño.

Si bien la actuación de Katherine fue emotiva y alegre, la misma estaba orientada por su motivación interna o personal. Su atención no estaba en el público o sus compañeros músicos, sino en su propia comprensión personal y su interacción con la música. La sinergia de la música que era cada vez más desafiante y la hábil interpretación de Katherine crearon lo que Csikszentmihalyi (2009) describe como un estado de “flujo”, o absorción emocional, cognitiva y física completa en una actividad agradable. A medida que se sumergía completamente en la experiencia, parecía trascender la conciencia del tiempo, de sí misma y de los otros niños. Si bien Katherine actuó con entusiasmo y fue entretenida para que la viera una audiencia, hacerlo no era su intención; Su enfoque era interno, y jugar servía para entretenerse principalmente a sí misma.

¹ Todos los nombres de los niños son seudónimos.

David: El Animador

David, de seis años, comenzó a actuar antes de que el ukelele estuviera en sus manos. Cuando el maestro que servía como investigador presentó el instrumento musical y el propósito de las lecciones, David se puso de pie y comenzó a pretender tocar la guitarra en el aire frente a sus compañeros de clase. Animado por sus risas, bailó y se deslizó por el suelo de rodillas para un "gran final". A lo largo de la secuencia de la lección, estaba continuamente buscando una audiencia. Las lecciones fueron grabadas en video para recopilar datos, y David a menudo se colocaba intencionalmente frente a la cámara mientras jugaba. Sonrió y bailó, y parecía más confiado cuando su actuación fue recibida con risas o aplausos. El aspecto interpersonal de la respuesta de David señala el papel que tienen las experiencias musicales en el desarrollo socioemocional. Sus actuaciones fueron impulsadas por la conciencia social de los sentimientos y reacciones de sus compañeros de clase, una competencia clave en el aprendizaje socioemocional.

En contraste con Katherine, David puede ser descrito como un artista orientado hacia el exterior. Su enfoque estaba casi exclusivamente en su relación con una audiencia, en lugar de su relación con el instrumento o la música en sí. Su comportamiento hizo evidente el valor de una auténtica experiencia de actuación para los niños, donde muchos maestros tal vez pueden describirlo como un "payaso de clase" o su comportamiento como disruptivo, permitirle actuar para sus compañeros canalizó su energía convirtiéndola en una actividad productiva. Cuando actuó en la ceremonia de graduación de su grupo, David sirvió como líder del grupo. El sonrió y rasgó el ukelele con energía, y asintió con la cabeza a sus compañeros de clase que estaban haciendo lo mismo. Su energía parecía contagiosa y mientras lo veían rebotar y cantar, los otros niños reflejaron su forma de actuar.

La actuación de David destaca el valor de la música como unificador; la clase estaba más cohesionada cuando se reían y hacían música juntos, o imitaban el rasgueo enérgico de David. Molnar-Szakacs, Green Assued y Overy (2012) sugieren que durante una interacción musical se crea un vínculo emocional y comunicativo, o una experiencia de movimiento afectivo compartido entre los individuos. Las mismas redes neuronales se pueden activar tanto en músicos como en oyentes, facilitando la vinculación social y la empatía (Molnar-Szakacs, Green Assued y Overy, 2012). Cuando David rebotaba mientras rasgueaba su ukelele, o se arrodillaba para tocar la guitarra de aire, el clima del aula cambiaba haciendo que los niños compartieran su espíritu juguetón y humor.

Xavier: El innovador

Tan pronto como se introdujo el ukelele, Xavier, de cinco años, comenzó a hacer preguntas: "¿Qué pasa si tuerzo estas cosas blancas? ¿Para qué sirven esas líneas? ¿Por qué las cuerdas suenan diferentes?" A lo largo de la secuencia de las lecciones, el cuestionó las formas convencionales existentes y propuso nuevas formas de utilizar el instrumento. Por ejemplo, preguntó por qué las personas zurdas todavía tenían que rasguear las cuerdas con la mano derecha, decidiendo voltear el ukelele al

revés para intentar rasguear con la mano izquierda. Después de aprender a tocar un acorde, Xavier comenzó a inventar sus propios acordes usando nuevas combinaciones para posicionar los dedos. Intentó sostener el ukelele en su regazo, detrás de su espalda o colocándolo en el suelo mientras rasgueaba, y exploró cómo estos cambios influyeron en el sonido del instrumento. Bateson y Martin (2013) definen la creatividad como "generar acciones o ideas novedosas, particularmente recomblando acciones, ideas o pensamientos existentes de nuevas maneras o aplicándolos en nuevas situaciones" (p. 55). La creatividad es el precursor de la innovación, en la que las nuevas ideas de uno son útiles o adoptadas por otros (Bateson & Martin, 2013). La experiencia de Xavier destaca la creatividad como una búsqueda orientada al descubrimiento donde repetidamente planteó preguntas, exploró nuevos métodos para tocar el ukelele y desafió los patrones de uso existentes. También modeló ideas novedosas para otros niños, que imitaron sus métodos. Vimos como era común ver a Xavier enseñando a otros niños los acordes que había inventado.

El juego a menudo implica romper las reglas y divertirse mientras lo hacen (Bateson & Martin, 2013). Si bien ningún intérprete profesional del ukulele elogiaría la técnica o el sonido de Xavier mientras este giraba las clavijas de afinación para crear acordes disonantes, rasgueaba el ukelele al revés o giraba las cuerdas para mirar hacia su cuerpo en lugar de hacia afuera, sus acciones sugieren su capacidad de pensar de manera flexible, fluida y original. Estos son importantes principios de la creatividad: ser flexible en el pensamiento, cambiar con fluidez entre diferentes enfoques y generar ideas novedosas (Runco et al., 2011). La experiencia de Xavier fue de innovación y exploración, y llena de preguntas como «¿Qué pasaría si...?» y «Me pregunto qué pasaría si lo intentara...?» Xavier demostró la música como una búsqueda creativa y lúdica, motivada por el deseo de descubrir.

María: La Narradora

A lo largo del estudio, se estimuló a los niños a considerar tanto el significado de las letras como el impacto emocional de la música. Las canciones seleccionadas incluían variaciones en el tempo, la tonalidad y el tema lírico, y los niños discutieron cómo estos elementos interactúan para crear significado. María, de seis años, fue más allá de la mera comprensión de este concepto sumergiéndose en la narración de historias, utilizando la música y el movimiento para crear y expresar significado.

Contar cuentos es una habilidad y una forma de arte que los niños usan para expresarse, y que los niños admiran entre ellos. La educadora Vivian Paley (2005) señala que "los niños están intoxicados por el suministro aparentemente interminable de temas disponibles para ser pensados" (p. 26). Los niños pequeños desarrollan habilidades auditivas, pensamiento y lenguaje, y sabemos que contar cuentos es un elemento clave para fomentar el desarrollo del lenguaje (Isik, 2016). La música puede unificar varias formas de comunicación, vinculando formas como contar historias, interpretar, el movimiento corporal y tocar un instrumento (Krüger, 2007). María usó sus expresiones faciales, sus movimientos corporales, su voz y su ukelele para contar una historia mientras actuaba. A continuación, incluimos la letra de una de las canciones que los niños aprendieron, titulada



Los grupos pequeños facilitan el juego social y el descubrimiento

municativas ... La mayoría de las improvisaciones son también el resultado de esfuerzos colectivos” para compartir historias entre los artistas y, cuando están presentes, una audiencia (p. 53). Los dos pequeños músicos encontraron su propio significado, comunicándose y compartiendo narrativas a través del movimiento y la canción. Esto es lo principal en la narración de cuentos: sentir y encontrar significado, y compartir ese significado con otra persona.

Brown (2009) afirma que “el juego se llama recreación porque nos hace nuevos de

nuevo; nos recrea a nosotros y a nuestro mundo” (p. 127). Si bien ninguno de estos niños tuvo una experiencia idéntica, cada uno participó en juegos que fueron significativos tanto individual como colectivamente. Crearon significado tanto dentro de sí mismos como en el mundo en el que aprenden y juegan, utilizando la música para explorar la emoción, conectarse con una audiencia, innovar y contar historias. Cada uno de estos niños demostró una interacción única con la música y su instrumento. Sin embargo, todos estaban comprometidos de una manera que era personalmente significativa, tanto como individuos como grupo. Es así que se invita a los maestros de la edad temprana a honrar las interpretaciones y expresiones individuales de los niños durante las experiencias musicales. La música sirvió para unificar a los niños como una comunidad a la vez que proporcionaba libertad para expresar sus diferencias individuales.

“Little Sid” [El pequeño Sid]

Little Sid ©Loughlin

Conocí a un niño tan pequeño
Lo llamaban Little Sid.
Quería aprender música,
Entonces, esto es lo que hizo.

Primero, probó el banjo,
Pero sus manos eran demasiado pequeñas.
Luego, probó la tuba,
Pero era demasiado alto.

Encontró el ukelele
Después de muchos intentos.
No demasiado grande para Little Sid.
¡Era justo para su tamaño!

Estas letras contienen una narrativa clara. Sin embargo, la actuación de María extendió el significado dentro del texto a un significado que ella misma creó. Al cantar la letra, “primero, probó el banjo”, ella rasgó su ukelele fuerte y enérgicamente, sonriendo y meciéndose de lado a lado. Luego, mientras cantaba, “pero sus manos eran demasiado pequeñas”, María comenzó a tocar en silencio. Su expresión facial cayó y sus hombros cayeron. Luego actuó revitalizada mientras cantaba la letra, “a continuación, probó la tuba”, representando las emociones de alguien que se ha desanimado, pero es perseverante. Su comportamiento demuestra empatía con el personaje de Little Sid, así como una capacidad para transmitir esas emociones a una audiencia.

María también fue notable en sus interacciones con otro niño, Taylor. María y Taylor actuaron en pareja, a menudo improvisando e inventando sus propias letras entre sesiones formales. Bjerstedt (2014) escribe que “las improvisaciones, entonces, son esencialmente co-

El juego musical en tu aula

Preparándonos para el juego musical

Los maestros que deseen fomentar el juego musical en los niños pequeños pueden comenzar creando un ambiente que invita y propicia el descubrimiento lúdico y guiado. Los grupos pequeños resultan ser más efectivos para las experiencias de educación musical permitiéndole a los niños oportunidades para interactuar socialmente a lo largo de las actividades guiadas, sin sentirse abrumados o distraídos por otros niños e instrumentos. Enseñar en un grupo pequeño también le permite al maestro proporcionar una orientación más individualizada, lo cual es útil durante las primeras experiencias donde aprenden, por ejemplo, la colocación de los dedos en el ukelele, el manejo de instrumentos y el rasgueo. Todas estas son experiencias donde a menudo los niños requieren un mayor nivel de asistencia del maestro cuando están aprendiendo por primera vez. Además, los grupos pequeños de tres a cinco niños permiten el juego social y el descubrimiento dirigido por sus compañeros, mientras cuentan con el apoyo de su maestro.

Los ukeles también se recomiendan como instrumentos para los niños de kindergarten. Son instrumentos que permiten a los niños experimentar con diferentes aspectos de la producción de sonido (a diferencia de los tambores, maracas y otros instrumentos de percusión, que solo producen ritmos). Los niños escuchan cambios en el tono de sus voces mientras cantan, y pueden explorar cómo crear cambios de tono similares en un instrumento de mano. El tamaño y la forma más pequeña del ukelele también lo hacen apropiado para el uso de niños pequeños; Cabe fácilmente en manos pequeñas y las cuerdas están separadas a poca distancia. Los acordes se pueden tocar con tan solo un dedo.

Descubrimiento guiado en el juego musical

Aprender a usar instrumentos debe comenzar con un período de descubrimiento guiado, durante el cual los niños explorarán los instrumentos musicales en contextos de juego estructurados y no estructurados. Primero, permita que los niños examinen el instrumento y exploren sus capacidades. Anímelos a hacer sonidos que encuentren agradables y aquellos que encuentren desagradables y a descubrir qué causa el cambio entre ellos. Esta experiencia de juego y descubrimiento puede y debe ser social donde los niños disfrutan compartiendo sus técnicas entre sí, y donde hacerlo puede dar paso a descubrir nuevas formas de uso. La novedad del instrumento hace necesario este período exploratorio. Para eventualmente aprender a tocar el instrumento de manera convencional, los niños primero deben experimentar con estos cómo se crea el sonido. Los niños como Xavier y Katherine, los creadores o espíritus libres, encontrarán el juego de exploración y descubrimiento no estructurado especialmente gratificante.

Luego de un tiempo de juego no estructurado, invite a los niños a compartir sus hallazgos: ¿Qué observaciones pueden hacer sobre el instrumento? ¿Qué sonidos fueron capaces de hacer y pueden demostrarlos? Aliente y celebre los sonidos y descubrimientos que hacen los niños, incluso aquellos que pueden sonar menos convencionalmente agradables al oído. Hacerlo cimienta el autoconcepto de los niños como músicos y fomenta la innovación y su creatividad. También establece un ambiente libre de riesgos y enriquecedor que será propicio para todo tipo de juego y aprendizaje.

Después que los niños hayan explorado los instrumentos por su cuenta, puede entonces dar paso a una introducción más estructurada. El maestro debe modelar el manejo convencional del instrumento, usando vocabulario musical junto con definiciones sencillas para los niños (es decir, "Puse mis dedos en el cuello del ukelele, esa es la parte que es larga y delgada. ¿Puedes encontrar el cuello de tu ukelele?"). Los niños no necesitan dominar este vocabulario, pero el modelado repetido del maestro puede ayudarlos a aprenderlo y a comunicar sus ideas de manera más efectiva durante el juego social. Durante este modelaje, resulta útil que los niños se turnen para demostrar habilidades musicales junto con el maestro. Por ejemplo, después de que el maestro haya demostrado cómo rasguear el instrumento, el maestro puede seleccionar a un voluntario para guiar a sus compañeros en la práctica del rasqueo.

Durante esta experiencia de descubrimiento guiada, los niños se podrán aprender prácticas tales como la forma de sostener

los instrumentos, rasguear y mantener un ritmo constante. Más adelante y, una vez que se han dominado estos fundamentos, se puede introducir el concepto de acordes, es decir de notas musicales. Comience a introducir acordes tocando diferentes sonidos, ya sea en el ukelele o con un segmento de música pregrabada, e instruya a los niños para que cambien sus movimientos a medida que cambia la música. Esta actividad ayuda a los niños a aprender a diferenciar entre diferentes sonidos; Llame su atención sobre los cambios en el tono, así como otras observaciones sobre la música. Luego, explique cómo se hacen estos diferentes sonidos usando algunos acordes.

Expresión creativa personal y juego en grupo

Después de un tiempo estructurado y no estructurado para explorar los instrumentos musicales, los niños pueden participar en la expresión creativa mientras aprenden canciones, tanto personalmente como en grupo. Las canciones seleccionadas deben ser breves, melódicamente simples y usar solo uno o dos acordes. Projete las letras de las canciones para que los niños las vean, y modele la lectura fluida mientras señala cada palabra, particularmente para los niños en una etapa emergente de alfabetización. Hacerlo ayuda a solidificar el concepto de correspondencia uno a uno y ayuda a los niños a desarrollar el reconocimiento de palabras. La letra y la melodía se pueden enseñar con la práctica y participación haciendo que los niños repitan después del maestro o un compañero líder.

Conclusión

Los niños que describimos en este artículo demostraron cuatro formas únicas y profundamente personales de experiencias con el juego musical. El juego musical puede servir para responder a propósitos y objetivos internos y externos a medida que los niños se relacionan y participan con instrumentos musicales de calidad diseñados para crear sonidos hermosos. El papel del maestro debe ser identificar cómo los niños abordan el juego musical, ya sea como animador, narrador o algo completamente inesperado, y nutrir la expresión creativa que ocurre en el juego. Los datos investigativos y conocimiento profesional sobre el juego y los enfoques lúdicos para el aprendizaje apoyan la importancia que tienen las experiencias musicales apropiadas y efectivas para los niños pequeños. En nuestras aulas, es importante brindar oportunidades para que los niños exploren la música en el contexto del juego con experiencias ya sea guiadas o no estructuradas para participar en juegos sociales musicales. Escojamos los instrumentos de mejor calidad disponibles e incorporemos canciones con letras que sean significativas, culturalmente diversas y relevantes, y que apoyan la alfabetización de los niños pequeños. Los niños son capaces de una expresión creativa de increíble profundidad durante el juego musical. Los profesionales de la edad temprana solo necesitan proporcionar el apoyo adecuado y entornos de juego para que los niños exploren, jueguen, aprendan y, por supuesto, hagan música.

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Reconsidering the Place of Games with Rules in the Early Elementary Classroom

Tsitsi Nyabando, Ruth Facun-Granadozo, and Stephanie Carr



Play is Universal

Play is a fundamental human activity that involves people of different ages and cultures (Van Hoorn et al., 2014). It is pivotal to children's learning and development (The National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020), and it is central to the early childhood curriculum (Van Hoorn et al., 2014). Daily and sustained engagement in play activities in school and at home, outdoors and indoors, alone and with others, using physical and mental energy, etc., positively influence children's developmental trajectories.

Play Benefits Children in Many Ways

Engagement in play is vital for children to learn 21st-century skills, especially problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, focused attention, and collaboration (Hillman et al., 2014; Singer, 2015; Yogman et al., 2018). These require developing executive functioning skills crucial for school readiness and success. Play fosters brain development and nurtures the learning of complex skills in a natural and joyful manner for children. In addition, it promotes children's learning of academic concepts (O'Neill & Holmes, 2022). Using traditional games in elementary schools enhances students' learning (Trajkovic

et al., 2018). Play that included physical activity at a recreational center affected primary age, 8 and 9-year-old students' performance on cognitive tasks (Hillman et al., 2014). In addition to cognitive benefits, research demonstrates that engagement in play has tremendous health benefits (Milteer et al., 2012) and reduces stress levels (Hatfield & Williford, 2017).

Cognitive skill development supports and is closely connected to young children's social and emotional skill development. Consequently, play facilitates children's development of social and emotional skills essential for their learning (Walker & Gopnik, 2013) and fosters self-regulation (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017). Moreover, it is

essential in developing attachment and helps children who experience adversity (Siviy, 2010). Both adult caregivers and children benefit from play; it helps them to develop relationships and experience joy (Yogman et al., 2018). Equally important, play is a powerful tool for transmitting cultural knowledge and values (Madondo & Tsikirai, 2021; Mutema, 2013). According to Yogman et al. (2018), the cultural context of play determines the skills children will learn.

Clearly, play is natural and highly beneficial to children. Early childhood education settings must incorporate many opportunities for children to engage in playful activities. Unfortunately, some cultures are losing the use of traditional games in children's play because the games are not documented. Also, some educators need to gain skills for using such games to teach academic concepts in early childhood classrooms (Madondo & Tsikirai, 2021).

Playing Games with Rules is a Part of Childhood

As children grow and develop different skills, the ways they engage in play change. According to Piaget (1948, 1951), children's first stage of play is apparent from 0-2 years. It involves sensorimotor activities



Games with rules help young children develop negotiating and other collaborative skills important for completing tasks.

and is purely for functional pleasure. Then, by ages 2-7, children engage in symbolic and imaginative play, subjecting objects to their activities without rules and limitations (e.g., using a block as a phone or a chair as a tower). Finally, by ages 7/8 through 11/12, when children develop the ability to decenter or consider multiple perspectives to a situation, they engage in games with rules.

Games with rules are played “with sensory-motor combinations (races, marbles, ball games, etc.), or intellectual combinations (cards, chess, etc.), in which there is competition between individuals (otherwise rules would be useless) and which are regulated either by a code handed down from earlier generations or by temporary agreement” (Piaget, 1951, p. 144). The passing and preservation of games with rules from one generation of children to another involves minimal adult intervention (Piaget, 1951). These games are played in social contexts, and many in groups (Kamii & DeVries, 1980). Rules and expectations control the games – bringing about a sanction when broken or not met. While the two earlier stages of play disappear as children grow, their engagement with games with rules increases and continues to adulthood. Vygotsky also acknowledged the value of games with rules in children’s development (DeVries et al., 2002). By engaging in games with rules, children learn from more knowledgeable others and exercise language as a tool for planning and social understanding (Vygotsky, 1978).

Playing Games with Rules Benefit Children

Research has demonstrated that games with rules foster children’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development and creativity. Playing games with rules requires complex cognitive skills (Piaget 1948, 1951), which allow children to further develop and practice the skillsets that are important for academic success (Madondo & Tsikirai, 2021; Savina et al., 2017). For instance, because of the na-

ture of games with rules, playing these facilitates children’s development of essential math skills (Vasileva et al., 2014). In a study with 6 to 7-year-old children, short-term memory for numbers and ability to follow verbal instructions improved for children who participated in outdoor games with rules (Savina et al., 2017).

Research that emphasizes board games as an effective tool to promote active learning and retention of knowledge includes a study of students aged

four to twelve years old. The research determined the use of board games not only cultivated motivation for learning but bred positive behavior changes in some students (Noda et al., 2019). The games included in the study examined mathematical and scientific knowledge through a competitive approach where students could move forward by answering questions correctly to allow students to progress with a definitive winner at the end of the game. Taking this research into consideration, one could conclude that the use of board games in the early childhood and elementary classroom can have a profound impact on learning, knowledge retention, and student motivation related to both learning and behavior.

Games with Rules Benefits Young Children

For young children to benefit the most socially and cognitively from games with rules, they “must be free to construct successful gaming sessions without adult guidance or interference” (Lancy & Grove, 2011, p. 492). When children create rules for games, they demonstrate the understanding that there must be agreement among the players or the people involved (Hardecker et al., 2017). Applying their co-created rules in the game allows them to play with flexibility and have ownership of the play (Lancy & Grove, 2011). For instance, when children decide the games to play, they must determine the number of players needed and decide if there is enough (Pramanik, 2018). Consequently, they adapt the game’s rules to fit their context (Charles et al., 2017; Piaget, 1951). Sometimes, they adjust the rules and create substitute items if they have limited players or resources, or tools to play the game. At other times, they modify the rules to accommodate the different abilities of the players.

Generating and adapting rules provide an opportunity for children to participate in creating conventions recognized by their community. This process helps them understand the crucial roles they play in

the social life of their society (Hardecker et al., 2017). When adapting rules to accommodate the weaker players, the experts scaffold (Vygotsky, 1978) the novices until they become the leaders for the next batch of newcomers. When players reach the upper limit of the Zone of Proximal Development, they increase the game's level of difficulty. According to Lancy and Grove (2011), when older children get opportunities to play with younger children, "games are less about learning rules and adhering to them than about learning to negotiate" (p. 494). Games with rules, therefore, help young children develop negotiating and other collaborative skills that are important for completing tasks. Integrating traditional games with rules in the classroom curriculum helps the students develop critical thinking skills, encourages cooperation, and increases teamwork (Vasileva et al., 2014).

Children Around the World Play Games with Rules

Children from different places have played games with rules for centuries. Diverse groups of people have passed on unique games from generation to generation and used them to transmit their cultural beliefs and values (Madondo & Tsikirai, 2021; Pramanik, 2018; Vasileva et al., 2014). In addition, many games with rules have evolved and traveled around the world. People of other cultures have adopted these to entertain and teach both the young and old. Therefore, games as a vehicle for learning in elementary schools (Savina et al., 2017; Vasileva et al., 2014) is not a new phenomenon.

The authors of this article are from different countries, but they all have significant memories of playing games with rules at home, around the neighborhood, and in schools. They have gained indelible insights that have helped them develop cognitive and socio-emotional skills and positive dispositions that are essential life skills.

The first author recalls playing Tsoro, a traditional game with rules played in different parts of Zimbabwe and other Southern African countries. Tsoro is a top-rated game usually played outdoors by children and requires several math-related skills. The game requires two players sitting on the ground across from each other taking turns to play. There are four rows of four or more holes with two small rocks in each hole between them. Each player's territory is the two rows closest to them. Player A moves the rocks from a hole in their outer row in a clockwise direction, dropping one in every hole as they go. If player A's last rock is dropped on their outer row with a rock or rocks in it, they pick those up and continue moving in a clockwise direction.

Suppose they happen to run out of rocks while in the inner row; they will take up all the rocks in the parallel holes on player B's sides and continue distributing the rocks on their holes until they run out. If their last rock lands on an empty outer hole or the inner hole opposite Player B's empty hole, player B takes a turn, following the same rules. The player who collects all the rocks wins the game. The game requires players to quickly make a mental plan and use math skills to identify a starting point to gain the most rocks on the other players' side. Children sometimes play Tsoro in small teams. Teamwork encourages the development of social skills, self-control, and coordinated effort. Tsoro play areas were "owned" by the children and



Figure 1. A group of children playing tsoro

Note. Mkhabela, O. (2018). Indigenous games today [photograph]. From *Indigenous games today* [Photograph]. <https://journ-express.blogspot.com/2018/03/indeginious-games-today.html?view=mosaic&m=1>. Used with photographer's permission obtained by the authors.

respected and preserved by all community members.

Tarisai Mukati is another popular traditional outdoor game in Zimbabwe. To play the game, several children sit close to each other in a circle. The only equipment required for the game is an object usually big enough for a player to hold in hand and small and light enough to be placed quickly on the ground without making any sound. One player runs around the circle leading others in a song that encourages everyone to focus on the inside of the circle. All the players sing along, and the player running around the ring will need to identify a suitable time to drop/place the object behind one of the players inconspicuously.

The leading player will continue running and singing until they get to their sitting spot in the circle and sit down. The goal is to get to their place before the other player notices that the object is behind them. Suppose the player is successful in doing that; the player with the object behind them will leave their place in the circle and sit in the middle. If the player sees the object, they will run after the leading player and touch them before sitting on their original spot. If they cannot catch the leading player, they will take the lead role and sing the song running around before placing the object behind the next player. The game continues until there is only one player left in the circle. The crucial aspects of the game are the development of physical, social, and emotional skills. Children often engage in problem-solving regarding rules of the game and sometimes adjust the rules when players of different abilities are involved.

The second author vividly remembers playing Shatong (also called Shato, Chatong, etc.) with the children in the neighborhood and her classmates. This is a stick game that was popular all over the Philippines. Shatong requires two individuals or two teams of players using a couple of straight, rounded sticks (around 30 inches and



Figure 2. Children playing Shatong

Note. Hunihini (n.d.). Children playing shatong. From *Instructional materials for teachers and learners of Bisaya language [clipart]*. <https://huni-huni.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/huni-huni-colored-syatong-1024x723.jpg>. Used with creator's permission obtained by the authors.

5 inches long) and a rhombus-shaped hole on the ground that is deep enough, so half of the shorter piece of wood sticks out. Cooperation among the children begins when they look for or create the sticks to be used in the game, form the teams, and find a primarily flat wide area with no traffic and glass windows. The game consists of three phases that increase in difficulty – successful completion of one phase signifies continuation to the next. In the first phase, player A puts the short stick on the hole and scoops it with the long stick, so it soars across the play area. The opponent tries to catch the stick. In this phase, player A should strategize and ensure that the stick will not be easy to catch.

Meanwhile, player B needs to estimate his movement and know his opponent so he can stay at about the right distance from the hole. If player B catches the stick, player A is out at this point. If not, player A will continue to the next phase. In the second phase, player A needs to strike the short stick with the long one, and player B tries to catch it. If player B catches it, player A is out; if not, player B tosses the stick back to player A, who, in turn, will strike it back. Then, player A will score by counting how many long stick's lengths the small stick is from the hole. Player A then proceeds to the final phase, in which they place the short stick on the hole with at least half of it sticking out. Player A strikes the stick to get it off the ground and strikes it hard forward. Player B tries to catch it. If player B fails to do that, player A will again add to the score by counting the small stick's distance from the hole using the long stick. Then, it is Player B's turn with the sticks, and player A becomes the catcher. Shatong players employ mathematical skills and knowledge of physics throughout the game. They need to problem-solve - adjusting their movements and strategies depending on how the game proceeds. Players also exercise teamwork, persistence, delay of gratification, and losing or winning cheerfully. Children in the cities, who cannot dig a hole in the concrete, improvised a couple of rocks to serve as the hole.

The third author's recollection of childhood games with rules involves fond memories with her mother, aunt, and grandmother. Growing up in the southern part of the United States, she remembers playing several card games with her family, who taught her the mechanics of the said games. The first card game she learned to play, which also became her favorite, is Go Fish. This game involves two or more individuals using a deck of 52 playing cards. The number of cards each gets depends on the number of players. If there are only two players, each gets seven cards, but if there are three or more, they only get five each. The rest of the deck is placed face down in the middle of the play area. The game's goal is to gather as many books of cards as possible (i.e., a book consists of all four of a kind: four fives, four kings, etc.) Players ask the person to their left for the cards they attempt to collect to make a book. The player asking must have at least one of the said cards to make a book. If the other person has the requested card, they need to hand it. If they do not have the requested card, they will respond to the request with, "Go Fish." The person that requested must then draw a card from the face-down pile. The game continues until all cards are played, and the player with the most books of cards is the winner.

Apart from good fine motor skills to ensure a good grip of the cards, so they do not fall or are seen by others, the Go Fish game helps children develop language skills, focus, and the ability to make informed decisions. Because the players who "fished" from the face-down pile of cards need to show everyone the card they have just drawn, the others have an idea which cards someone is holding. The third author recalls that the interactions that happen during the game brought her a source of comfort and respect and gratitude for having quality time with the significant people in her life. She also recalls playing Go Fish with her peers and teaching those who did not know the game's mechanics. This teaching experience has sparked this author's love for teaching. Further, playing Go Fish and other card games with her family and peers has facilitated learning essential life skills such as planning, organizing, navigating social relationships, and emotional self-regulation.

Games with Rules in Early Childhood Classrooms

There is a place for games with rules in early childhood classrooms. The examples of games played and loved by the authors demonstrate the many short- and long-term benefits children could gain from playing them. According to Kamii and DeVries (1980), group games are useful in attaining the objectives for early education that they have formulated based on Piaget's theory. These are:

1. In relation to adults, children to develop their **autonomy** through secure relationships in which adult power is reduced as much as possible
2. In relation to peers, children to develop their ability to **decenter** and coordinate different points of view
3. In relation to learning, children to be **alert, curious, critical, and confident in their ability to figure things out**, and say what they honestly think. Also, for them to have **initiative; come up** with interesting ideas, problems, and questions; and put things into relationships (Kamii & DeVries, 1980, p. 12).

Children playing games with rules is not a common sight in today's early elementary classrooms (Madondo & Tsikirai, 2021; Trajkovik et al., 2018). As stated by Piaget (1948, 1951) and described in the authors' examples, competition is an inherent component of games with rules. The idea of competition turns away several educators from employing such activities in their classrooms (Kamii & DeVries, 1980). However, educators must realize that the competition when playing games with rules also brings forth a deep level of cooperation among the players (Vasileva et al., 2014). Collaborative skills—within and between groups and the ability to remain engaged for an extended period are required when playing group games (Frost et al., 2012). More importantly, all players must be able “to submit to the rules and to exercise self-control” (Frost et al., 2012, p. 186). Teachers can incorporate games with rules into their social studies, science, mathematics, reading, and physical education lessons. Once children have acquired the ability to participate in rule-governed activities, teachers can take advantage of games as instructional tools to introduce a playful learning atmosphere into the classroom (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1990; Kamii & DeVries, 1980; Owens & Sanders, 1998 as cited in Frost et al. 2012).

Ways to Integrate Games with Rules in Early Elementary Classrooms

There are many ways to integrate games with rules in early elementary classrooms. Games with rules offer excellent opportunities for teaching content area concepts and deepening children's understanding of a lesson. For example, children can play Connect Four or tic-tac-toe while practicing their phonics and phonemic awareness skills. Additionally, games such as bingo and Jeopardy could be easily adapted for teaching and evaluating children's understanding of concepts they have recently learned in class. In the modified version of the game, concepts related to current or previous lessons are used in place of the numbers in the classic bingo card. The rules of the game remain. In the same way, Jeopardy offers a playful opportunity to help students retain and recall information they have learned. Teachers may ask questions that requiring students to apply their understanding to determine the answer to increase the difficulty. Additionally, children's experiences with games with rules are excellent topics for meaningful writing workshops. Digital games with rules, such as Kahoot and Slides with Friends, are also excellent for small-group concept-reinforcement activities, especially these days when several schools have Internet access and electronic gadgets.

Games with rules are an excellent alternative to worksheets and film-showing during rainy days. A variety of board games such as Scrabble, Snakes and Ladders, Chess, Checkers, Mastermind, Chinese Checkers, Monopoly; card games such as Go Fish, Make a Family; and other tabletop games like Boggle, Jenga, Mancala/Tsoro/Sungka, and Connect Four are perfect free-choice activity options when outdoor play is not possible, or there is a modified schedule that creates a block of non-instructional time. These games provide several opportunities for the children to exercise higher-order-thinking skills, practice vital social and emotional skills, and apply their understanding of academic concepts (Hassinger-Das et al. 2017; O'Neill & Paige, 2022). Intentionally creating accessible spaces for the materials used for these games with rules in the classroom and providing time encourages the children to discover these and engage in playful learning with their peers. Gradually introducing games that

are developmentally appropriate for the target learners throughout the year using mini-lessons ensures understanding of the mechanics and rules of the games. In the process, teachers need to consider the unique needs of some learners so everyone can benefit the most from the gaming experiences. Rotation of materials and having a featured game space help keep children from being overwhelmed with the vast amount of materials and choices available to them.

The outdoor classroom is an excellent venue for children to engage in physically active games with rules such as four square, jack, Chinese jump rope, dodgeball, hopscotch, tag, Spud, etc. One thing to emphasize is the importance of stimulating or sparking students' interest by doing such activities as reading a book aloud or providing materials for games. Setting up materials such as giant chess boards, giant connect four, hopscotch materials, beanbag toss, ball for dodgeball, sitting spaces for playing board and card games outdoors is an excellent way to encourage young children to engage in the games. Not only does an intentional set-up captivate student interest, but it also makes materials easily accessible for students from diverse backgrounds and abilities.

Because many games may be new to students, teachers can model or provide clear visual instructions about playing the games. Playing games with rules outdoors offers excellent opportunities for children to collaborate with their peers in pairs or larger groups. In addition, just like in the classroom, the teacher can use the games to teach social studies, math, and literacy concepts. Games from other cultures or communities are a great way to pique student interest in learning about different cultures or add meaning to a book the class may be reading. Another way teachers can use the games in the early childhood classroom is as strategies for transitions and during transitions, for instance, as students wait for a school-wide activity to start.

Even if games with rules are played best by children who have developed the required cognitive skills, younger children could also benefit from being introduced to simpler ones. Some examples are Simon Says, Pin the Tail on the Donkey, I Spy with My Eyes, Touch the Color, Musical Chairs, and tag. Adults and older children can also provide support to younger children when playing more advanced games with rules.

The opportunities for learning academic and life skills through games with rules are endless. With early childhood teachers' creativity, games with rules provide an excellent opportunity to engage early elementary-age students in active and fun learning experiences, both inside the classroom and outdoors.

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Supporting Parents of Preschoolers with Disabilities: An Investigation of Parents' Perceptions and Use of Formal and Informal Supports

Catherine Rogers Gaspar



Parenting a child with a disability can be stressful. Literature has found significant differences in the stress and wellbeing of parents of children with disabilities compared to parents of typically developed children (Hayes & Watson, 2013; Olsson & Hwang, 2008; Padden & James, 2017). These parents may face unique burdens related to caring for the disability that can have negative effects on their quality of life (Çolak & Kahrman, 2021). The responsibilities related to caring for children with disabilities may overload parents (Olsson & Hwang, 2008), as navigating their children's specialized needs, behaviors, and services place them at increased risk for stress (Hodgetts et al., 2017; Plant & Sanders, 2007; Rivard et al., 2014). As children age, parent responsibilities increase (Çolak & Kahrman, 2021), thus it is important to support families beginning early in their parenting experience and provide them with a strong foundation of tools and information.

Parents of children with disabilities often feel unprepared to navigate their parenting journey (Currie & Szabo, 2019; Reeder & Morris, 2021). Early childhood is an especially precarious period as parents are

in an adjustment phase; coming to terms with their child's disability and learning about their care and other needs (DePape & Lindsay, 2015; Reeder & Morris, 2021). Early childhood is an important time for parents to receive support and access information, which can influence their adjustment to their child's diagnosis (Adler et al., 2015). Parents of young children have reported needing information and support in their child's condition and care, specific needs, and navigating services, including understanding the special education process and service implementation (Douglas et al., 2016; 2017; Pituch et al., 2020). They also requested emotional support as they adjust to their new parenting role, balance personal self-care and wellbeing, and support in connecting with peers with similar experiences (Douglas et al., 2016; Pituch et al., 2020).

Sources of Support for Parents

For parents, support may come from different contexts. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological model proposes that families are influenced through interactive systems (e.g., microsystem, meso-system, ecosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem) and that these multiple contexts, including personal, school, and broader societal and systemic structures, influence family and child outcomes (Rous et al., 2007). From a special education lens, processes for children are interwoven with these ecological contexts including parents and service providers (i.e., microsystems), the wider special education team (i.e., mesosystems), teacher, parent, or community factors (i.e., exosystems), and policies (i.e., macrosystems) (Ruppar et al., 2017). As such, it is important to examine parent experiences with these different contexts. A 2018 systematic review used an ecological perspective to examine barriers for parents of

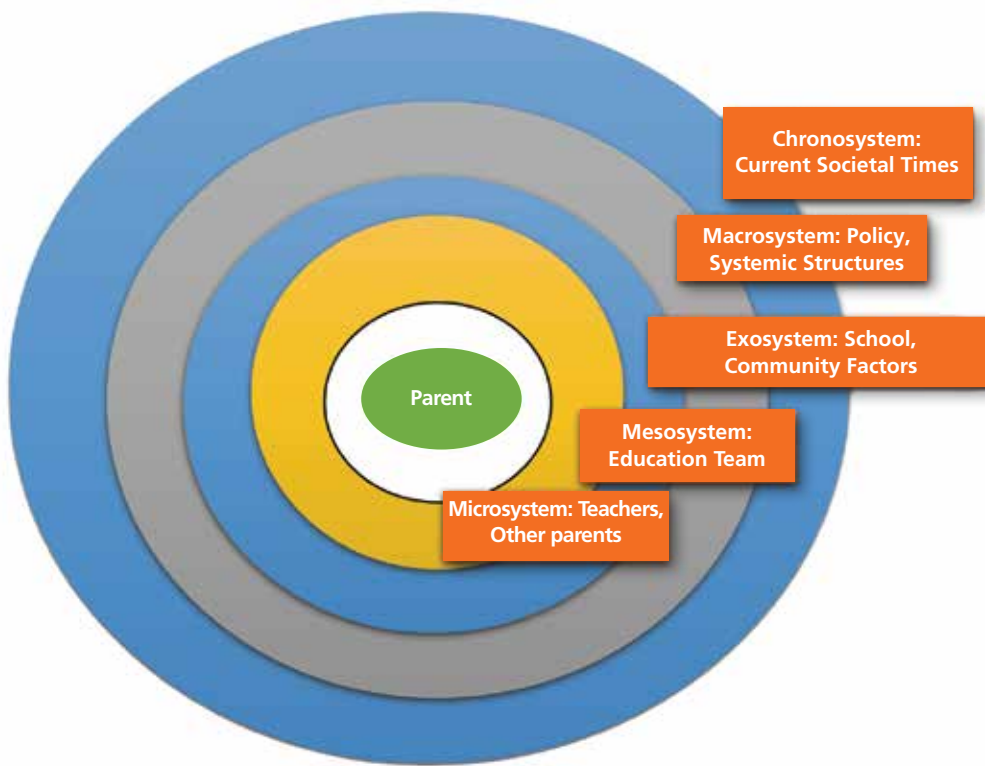


Figure 1. Ecological contexts in the scope of special education and the current study

children with disabilities and found that parent-reported barriers fell at three levels: family, school, and system, suggesting these are three key levels where parents require support (Hirano et al., 2018). Figure 1 illustrates examples of ecological contexts that may be influential for parents in the scope of special education and are explored in the current study.

Schools can be important facilitators of parent support at each of these levels. They are the center of children's implementation of services and connect families with broader information and resources on systems or policies (Anaby et al., 2018). Schools are crucial in the provision of formal supports, which are established resources that parents can access (Meaden et al., 2010). While likely to differ based on location and school setting, research has estimated that over 70% of students attend a school with at least one formal parent support service such as parent liaisons, parent resource centers, or parent workshops (Duchnowski et al., 2013). Formal supports may also extend to teacher and professional input, individual education plan (IEP) team meetings, or other parent resources specific to the school such as family liaisons or family services. At a system level, formal support may include virtual resources like online guides or websites, or in-person structures like parent centers (National Parent Technical Assistance Center, 2013) or contact with higher level personnel (Farley et al., 2020). Schools may also provide a common ground for informal supports, such as inter-parent relationships and social networks (Meaden et al., 2010). These informal supports supplement formal resources and complete a well-rounded support system where parents can effectively participate, obtain information, and build an in-

terpersonal network (Daly et al., 2015; Meaden et al., 2020).

Supports are Important for Parents

Literature has demonstrated the need and benefits of parent supports. Parents of elementary students with disabilities who utilized support resources reported lower levels of caregiver strain, higher involvement with their child's educational program, and their children demonstrated improved behavioral, emotional, and academic functioning (Duchnowski et al., 2013; Kutash et al., 2012). When provided with school-centered supports, parents of students with disabilities also grew in parenting efficacy and personal empowerment (Cooc & Bui, 2017; Knowles et al., 2016). Further, informal supports such as parent social networks increased parents' feelings of belonging and inclusion (Bray et al., 2017).

Although benefits have been documented, little is known on how these social, school, and system supports are perceived by parents and how parents use these supports in their day-to-day functioning. This is what motivated this study that examined parents' perceptions of available supports to identify gaps and provide descriptive information to guide practical improvements and program development.

About this study This study was an exploratory investigation of parent support structures in early childhood special education. Participants were parents or primary caregivers of children enrolled in preschool special education programs at a network of early childhood centers in an urban area.

All study procedures were approved by the researcher's university and participating schools. On behalf of the researcher, the participating schools sent a cover letter, consent form, and survey to parents of preschoolers enrolled in special education services. To ensure participation, Spanish translations of documents were provided. Caregiver respondents returned the completed survey and consent to the school, where it was delivered to the researcher. Of the 50 surveys sent out, 14 were returned (response rate of 28%). Results of the survey were shared with the participating schools.

Gathering Data

For this study, data was collected through a 27-item survey created by the researcher in collaboration with the administration of the participating schools. The survey was estimated to take

10-15 minutes to complete. Of interest for this study were select items from demographic, school, system, and social support domains. Two open-ended items in the school and system domain asked parents to list the supports they found the most helpful from that respective context.

What was Found Family Demographic Information

The children of the 14 parent respondents were preschoolers that had an average age of 3 and 4 years old, and had been enrolled in a preschool program for an average of almost two years. The majority of children (83.3%) had participated in early intervention (EI) prior to beginning preschool special education services. Demographically, the majority of parents identified themselves as Latinx background (41.7%), followed by white or Caucasian (33.3%), black or African American (16.7%), and bi/multi-racial (8.3%). Some parents declined to respond to specific demographic items.

Parent Ratings of Support

Parents rated their perceptions of support from the three contexts (i.e., school, system, social), and overall rated supports from school and system contexts higher than from the social context. Parents felt most supported by the school, with the majority (13) of parents reporting feeling adequately supported or very supported) by their preschool program. Parents also rated feelings of respect from the school highly. When asked to list supports they found the most helpful, parents listed teacher and administrative input, family liaisons, and family services.

Overall, parents felt supported by the school system, with the majority (nine) of parents reporting feeling adequately supported or very supported. Feelings of respect from the school system received similar ratings. When asked to list the system supports they found most helpful, parents listed family support centers that were available in their area or district-level contacts from their service plans.

Social support received the lowest ratings from parents. When asked to rate their communication with other parents, seven parents rated these communications as not at all or very little. They felt a deflated sense of community with other parents, as well. Interestingly, despite low ratings of communication and community with other parents, the majority (ten) of respondents reported feeling respected or very respected by other parents.



Discussion

This study examined the perceptions of support from parents/caregivers of preschoolers with disabilities. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, three ecological contexts (school, system, and social) were identified as potential sources of support. Of the three, parents reported higher feelings of support from school and system and indicated a variety of specific supports from these contexts that they found helpful. This indicates that parents felt overall strong support from formal sources, which is encouraging as Siklos & Kerns (2006) found that families view these professional, formal supports as critical to their experiences. However, parents in the present study reported social support (i.e., support from other parents) as more limited, which for this group, indicated the existence of weaker informal supports.

Need For Supports to Avoid Feelings of Isolation

Findings from this study align with prior work that highlights the isolation of raising a child with a disability (Bray et al., 2016; Dew et al., 2019). Parents of children with disabilities have been found to have more limited, unsupported social networks (Dembo et al., 2022). However, it is known that parents want to connect with their peers, especially those with similar experiences (Douglas et al., 2016). Parents of children with disabilities have described the understanding, nonjudgmental atmosphere, and mutual support of connecting with someone who has experienced similar circumstances to their own (Bray et al., 2017). Past work has shown that stronger, more supportive social networks are beneficial to parent wellbeing (Dembo et al., 2022), resulting in more motivated, hopeful parent attitudes (Bray et al., 2016) and greater parent empowerment and advocacy (Boshkoff et al., 2016).

While schools and services provide important information and formal

supports, social networks provide crucial informal support, focused on emotional, interpersonal connections (Bray et al., 2016). Both are required for a well-rounded, complete system of support. Prior work evidences that families of children with disabilities who receive formal support from professionals and service providers, plus informal support from interpersonal networks have greater resilience and coping than families who only receive one of these support sources (Meaden et al., 2010; Peer & Hillman, 2014). By ensuring parents have access to all avenues of support, it opens the doors for fuller, more effective participation in their children's education and development.

This study had limitations, including a small sample size that was representative of a limited proportion of the parent population and possibly subjective since based on sampling from one geographic area, age range, and school network. It also does not account for other sources of parent support, such as family or home factors, and does not address recent changes in school procedures and climates due to COVID-19. Nevertheless, this study offers important insights into the perceptions and patterns of support for parents of children with disabilities and provides implications for practice.

Implications for Practice

Results from this study demonstrate a need for improved informal support for parents. Just as schools are critical to the provision of formal support to families and parents, they can play an important role in facilitating informal support (Meaden et al., 2010; Peer & Hillman, 2014). From an ecological lens, microsystems such as families and schools have strong, reciprocal influence on one another (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Schools have the ability to initiate changes that guide practices and changes in other systems (Hirano et al., 2018). Schools also provide a common ground for parents who may be juggling daily barriers such as schedule or personal conflicts (Dew et al., 2019). Clearly, schools are a mutual, convenient place for parents to connect with others and share experiences. They also have preexisting and well-established infrastructures for support, as they share resources and act as an information center for parents, processes that may lend themselves to promoting informal support and parent-to-parent connections. The recent shift to virtual learning procedures (Marshall & Bradley-Dorsey, 2020) may also be of benefit, as parents are echoing these trends and increasing their use of technology. Communication with other parents was ranked lowest in the present study, but schools' virtual strategies could be helpful in addressing that need. Parents have recently opted for virtual methods to network with one another, using strategies such as text, email, and social media to communicate (Dodds, 2021) and seeking connections through broader mediums such as websites or social media platforms (DeHoff et al., 2016).

Providing Informal Parent Supports

One program that provides informal parent support and has documented success throughout literature is the parent-to-parent (P2P) programs. In these programs, parents of children with disabilities support one another and develop a community through social events, social media, trainings, and mentoring (Dew et al., 2019; Dodds & Singer, 2018; Kutash et al., 2011; Kutash et al., 2012). These programs take a unique approach and designate parents as facilitators

in addition to participants. Alongside professionals, parents co-design programming and play key roles in implementation (Dew et al., 2019). Participants in these programs have reported decreased strain and higher feelings of support, and their children had improved academic and social-emotional outcomes (Kutash et al., 2011; Singer et al., 1999) which continued over time (Kutash et al., 2012). Overall, these findings demonstrate the positive influence of informal support. Expanding awareness and reach of programs such as these may further empower parents and offer them community and sources of coping and support, and leading to fuller, complete systems of parent support.

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Early Childhood Play and Academics: What Are Parents' Perceptions?

Katie Swart and Katie Houser



Academics is not the sole component of school readiness; rather, it is a compilation of children's physical, social-emotional, language, and cognitive development (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2009; National Education Goal Panels, 1997). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) has advocated the need for teachers to engage young children in developmentally appropriate activities. Play is developmentally appropriate for young children and "is the process that helps assimilate all that we know, learn, understand, and feel" (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2020, p. 9). Thus, play is a vehicle for learning and growth in multiple areas of early childhood development.

Benefits of Play

According to Christakis (2016), "Play is the fundamental building block of human cognition, emotional health, and social behavior. Play improves memory and helps children learn to do mathematical problems in their heads, take turns, regulate their impulses, and speak with greater complexity" (p. 146). An increasing body of research from multiple sectors of the academic community on brain development are also provoking new thinking on issues around the role of executive function skills for school readiness, the importance of social and emotional development, and the role of play in the devel-

opment of creativity and critical thinking (Yogman et al., 2018). With increasing integration of technology and interactive media in early childhood programs, intentional and developmentally appropriate quality care and practices are necessary to support young children's development across the early years and beyond.

Play experiences during activity centers or interest areas provide opportunities for open-ended, child-directed activity, planning & decision-making, collaboration, levels of complexity, self-control, and accountability in the development of young children. Children learn by doing. Play is not frivolous; it is brain building. Play has both direct and indirect effects on

brain structure and functioning. Play leads to changes at the molecular (epigenetic), cellular (neuronal connectivity), and behavioral levels (social-emotional and executive functioning skills) that promote learning and adaptive and/or prosocial behavior (Yogman et al., 2018). The benefits of play are vast, well documented, and include advancements in executive functioning, language, reading and writing, numeracy and spatial concepts, social-emotional development, physical development, and an enhanced sense of agency (Yogman et al., 2018). According to the Harvard Center on the Developing Child (n.d.), executive functioning is a set of skills that include the ability to plan and meet goals, display self-control, follow multiple-step directions even when interrupted, and stay focused despite distractions. The following three dimensions can characterize executive function: cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, and working memory, all observable when children play. Theory and research strongly support the benefits of play and since play provides children with opportunities to explore and interact with the world around them, it is not surprising there is a link between play experiences during early childhood and later school success (Fisher et al., 2011).

The Loss of Play

Unfortunately, the current focus on academics in early childhood

Children need long, uninterrupted blocks of time to engage in complex play

education has resulted in less emphasis placed on play as a learning tool. Research findings suggest a growing emphasis on early academic preparation for children through structured activities, opposing the play-learning approach supported by developmental research (Fisher et al., 2008). Young children are being asked to complete tasks and activities that were once meant for older children and are developmentally inappropriate. Many believe the sooner young children are taught basic academic skills, the better they will do in school in the long term. However, there is little research to support these claims. According to Anne Haas Dyson (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009), "Parents and educators who favor traditional classroom-style learning over free, unstructured playtime in preschool and kindergarten may actually be stunting a child's development instead of enhancing it" (p.1). Studies that compared the performance of children attending academic preschools with those attending play-based preschools showed no advantage in reading and math achievement for children attending academic preschools. However, evidence did suggest that children attending academic preschools had higher levels of test anxiety, were less creative, and had more negative attitudes toward school than did the children attending play-based preschool. Moreover, Panksepp (2007) suggested that play deprivation can be associated with the increasing prevalence of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). What research reveals is that young children need long, uninterrupted blocks of time to engage in complex play, not direct instruction and testing in math and literacy.

Family Perceptions of Play and Learning

Families want the best for their children. They want their children to begin their formal schooling experience prepared, but at what cost? Parents and other family members are their child's first teachers and their participation in play has significant benefits for building relationships as well as developmental aspects (Singh & Gupta, 2012). Belfield and Garcia (2014) conducted a study of parents' opinions about school readiness from 1993 to 2007. They reported that parents' expectations for the types of skills their child should have by kindergarten increased significantly (Belfield & Garcia, 2014). Moreover, there is likely variability in how parents and families view play; and parents and families may differ in their perspectives about the value of play, as well as the types of play that promote academic readiness. Parents and families play the ultimate role in determining school readiness; they do so not only by promoting their children's development but



also by deciding when to send them to school and which school they will attend. Furthermore, parent and family beliefs and actions regarding play are therefore critical to understanding school readiness (Belfield & Garcia, 2014). While parent and family beliefs appear to play a significant role in their child's development, play-learning beliefs remain relatively unexplored in the developmental literature (Fisher et al., 2008). Therefore, the need to explore parents' beliefs motivated the design and implementation of this study.

Context for the Study

The theoretical framework for this study aligns with the belief in the concept of play supported by Piagetian and Vygotskian approaches in making meaning of how children learn and expand their social-emotional, physical and cognitive capabilities. It is the interplay of multiple factors, such as the child's disposition, the role of play partners and the contextual nature of play, which stimulates development across the various domains. Piaget (1962) saw play as a behavior that emerges because of combining skills, knowledge and understanding to create a learning experience. Play continues to get more complex as children grow, helping to gain mastery and coordination (Vygotsky, 1978). Concerned about parent's views about play, this study explored the important questions of how parents and families view and support their child's play.

Purpose

Parent and family beliefs regarding their child's play are important against the rising pressures of education, learning, and making decisions about everyday routines for children. In this study, parents' value of play was investigated. Parents completed an electronic survey that assessed their beliefs about their child's play and the role of play in learning. Through the survey, parent gender, parent education, and child age were examined as potential influences on parents' views about the value of play.

Procedures

Participants and setting

Forty-six parents of children who attended a play-based, child centered early childhood development center participated in this study. Participants' demographic information included a majority of female participants (65%). Altogether, participants were ethnically diverse with (67% Caucasian, 11% Black, 9% Asian, and 12% who identified as other. Eighty-seven percent of parent participants were between 36-45 years of age with graduate degrees.

The setting for this project was a play-based, child centered early childhood development center, located in a university campus. The program has provided high quality care and education for children ages two through six for over 40 years. They are deeply committed to the use of play as a means for learning and serving as a model for "best practices" across the geographic region. The center was a state licensed, nationally accredited by NAEYC, and certified as a Nature Explore outdoor classroom program. It also acts as a demonstration program, providing university students, families, and members of the greater community with the opportunity to see and experience play-oriented programming in early childhood practice.

The program is known to place the highest priority on development of "executive function" skills, which include self-regulation, focus, persistence, curiosity, problem solving and conflict-resolution, critical thinking, and language and literacy skills. Using an "emergent" approach and through intentional planning, balancing and documenting child-initiated and teacher directed activities and assessments, master teachers develop weekly lesson plans using both NAEYC and state learning standards, as well as the children's interest to guide their planning and decision making of classroom materials.

For the purposes of this study, the researchers utilized a survey. An adapted version of the Parent Play Belief Scale (PPBS) (Fogle & Mendez, 2006) was used to determine parents' beliefs about their child's play. The survey consisted of 24 items rated on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) and one open-ended question. The survey had two subscales: play support and academic focus. The PPBS was originally designed as a measurement tool to examine the multi-dimensional avenues of African-American parents' play beliefs including 'developmental significance of play, participation in play, enjoyment of play' as well as 'perspectives on play and pre-academic activities' (Fogle & Mendez, 2006, p. 509). The PPBS has also been used reliably with Caucasian samples in unpublished studies conducted by the first author.

What We Found from the Survey

Responses were analyzed and findings indicated that of the 76 possible participants, 46 parents completed the survey, yielding a strong 61% response rate. Results indicated overwhelmingly positive perceptions of play as a tool for learning. Interestingly, parent participants had mixed responses to the questions that involved reading to their children. Survey responses gathered from the participants are included in **Table 1**.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine parents' beliefs about their child's play and the role of play in learning. Results indicated overwhelmingly positive perceptions of play as a tool for learning. Responses suggested parents placed a higher value on social emotional learning (SEL) and play than on academic skills. Statements

including information about the importance of play and reading received mixed responses. Over half the participants indicated a desire to read with their children rather than play with them. However, the majority (66%) disagreed that reading with their child was more worthwhile than playing with them. This could indicate some parents may have higher comfort levels engaging in play with their children. Moreover, several of those statements were written in a manner where it appeared the participant had to choose which was more favored, when in fact reading to and playing with your child are both important and correlate with academic readiness skills. In fact, research shows that children who are engaged in sociodramatic play use language to develop scripts, thus merging the literacy skills of reading and

Table 1 Participant Responses from the Parents Play Belief Scale (PPBS)

Question	Agree	Disagree
Play can help my child develop social skills, such as cooperating and making friends.	100%	0%
Play can improve my child's language and communication abilities.	100%	0%
Play can help my child develop better thinking abilities.	100%	0%
Through play, my child develops new skills and abilities.	100%	0%
Playing at school will help my child get ready for kindergarten.	100%	0%
Play does not help my child learn academic skills like counting or recognizing letters.	2%	98%
Play does not influence my child's ability to solve problems.	2%	98%
I do not think my child learns important skills by playing.	4%	96%
It is more important for my child to have good academic skills than to play well with other children.	17%	83%
I would rather read with my child than play together.	56%	44%
Reading to my child is more worthwhile than playing with him or her.	34%	66%

The final open-ended question yielded limited responses. Of the responses recorded, none addressed information related to the participants' perceptions of play as a mode for learning or information relative to the survey.

writing into play. Having practice with these skills, allows children to transfer their knowledge to reading texts within a school setting (Hall, 1991).

These results are positive and optimistic. However, it is important to consider the larger community and society. With the emphasis on academics in early childhood programs and the national importance placed on universal pre-K, it cannot be assumed that all parents and families of young children view play as an appropriate and effective mode for learning. Furthermore, in research conducted by Belfield and Garcia (2014), where a national data set was used to analyze information from a 14-year period, the findings indicated that parents reported higher expectations for children to know their letters and count in 2007 compared to 1993. Personal beliefs influence how parents and families interact with their children, which in turn, influence child developmental outcomes (Fisher et al., 2008). It has also been pointed out by Fisher et al (2008), that play-learning beliefs may also influence the way parents and families structure their children's early learning experiences.

For many parents and families, the current focus only on academic achievement, after-school enrichment programs, increased homework, concerns about test performance, and even future college acceptance, is risky. The stressful effects of this approach often result in the later development of anxiety and depression and a lack of creativity. Parent and family guilt has led to competition over who can schedule more "enrichment opportunities" for their children. As a result, there is little time left in the day for children's free play, for reading to children, or for family meal times (Yogman et al., 2018). Many schools have cut recess, physical education, art, and music to focus on preparing children for standardized tests. Unsafe local neighborhoods and playgrounds have led to nature deficit disorder for many children.

Educational reformers who acknowledge the value of playful learning or guided play, which captures the strengths of both approaches and may be essential to improving executive functioning, are now challenging the false dichotomy between play versus formal learning. Research shows that many factors influence the support of emergent literacy and other cognitive skills including environmental print, dramatic play spaces, books, and toys or other objects (Lynch, 2011). It is imperative that early childhood professionals work with parents and families to help them better understand the value of play, how to choose toys and play materials that promote quality play, and how to build quality playtime into their family's daily lives. Early childhood programs should provide children with an opportunity for exploration and inquiry, collaboration, and makerspaces, a different approach from the model that promotes more exclusive didactic learning at the expense of playful learning.

Comments about Our Findings

While the current study provided new information about parents' beliefs regarding their child's play and the role of play in learning, there were several limitations. The sample size was noticeably small and ethnically homogenous. Moreover, the parent participants' possible prior knowledge and experiences within the early childhood development center must be taken into consideration. The parents included in the sample actively chose a play-based and child-centered

program. It is likely that parents and families who want their children to attend this type of early childhood development center would value the philosophical undertone that play has in the curriculum. Thus, these parents are likely aware of developmentally appropriate practices and support these types of learning environments. Still, despite these limitations, the findings yield relevant and important information for early childhood stakeholders and educators.

Key Implications

Parents and families may value choosing an early childhood program for their child that implements a play-based and child centered approach. Survey results indicated parents feel that play can help their child develop better thinking abilities and develop new skills. Therefore, the program will continue to grow the mission and advocate for play-based programming in neighborhood public school programs. This includes planning professional development opportunities to help teachers and student staff learn how to use informal assessment observations during uninterrupted blocks of play to recognize the complex cognitive actions and communication that children are able to produce during play. Teachers will learn how to use these observations to intentionally plan instructional units using the state learning standards and building on the interests of the children. The program will invite observers and teachers in the community to visit the center and learn this teaching process, while helping teachers become more knowledgeable in ways they can integrate developmentally informed practices into their teaching.

Our findings also indicated that parents feel playing at school helps their child get ready for kindergarten and help develop social skills, such as cooperating and making friends. Play is often underestimated for its unique way of influencing the development of children both cognitively and socially (McEntire, 2009). Thus, the researchers recommend helping families grow their understanding of the importance of play, its role in developing academic skills (i.e. math, reading, and writing), and how it is essential to child development. For example, the role of play with regard to reading helps children develop the functional skills of working with print and texts. The type of play most often empirically linked to literacy development is sociodramatic play that includes the self-directed, imaginative use of language, symbolic representation, and reciprocal roles (Sutton-Smith, 1998, 1999). The program will collaborate with college faculty to host sessions helping families understand how play relates to developing emotion regulation and the ways children practice this through play. In addition, by scheduling daily blocks of time for children to participate in imaginative play the children have opportunities to role-play and negotiate among themselves to develop social emotional competence contributing to school readiness (Harrington, 2020).

To advocate for play in early childhood classrooms, programs may continue to analyze what factors contribute to parent and community perceptions of play. Programs may collaborate with district public school administrators to better support their understanding of the relationship between play and academic success and how it helps children transition to the demands of formal schooling (Bodrova, 2019). Understanding parent and family perspectives may facilitate productive communication and enhance partnerships efforts between the school and families (West & Pirtle, 2014).

Implications for Future Research

Future research should replicate this study across multiple settings with more socio-economically diverse samples. Ideally, the sample sizes should also be larger. The Parent Play Belief Scale (PPBS) should be adapted to adjust questions that prompt families to choose the importance of playing with their child versus reading to them when in fact they are both important and correlated. As Saracho and Spodek (2006) stated, "During play children participate in reading and writing experiences that develop the literacy skills they need for formal reading instruction" (p.716). Furthermore, family composition varies and not all children live with a mother and father. Future research should extend to examining the link between families' play beliefs and their child's play behavior and academic readiness. As educators and researchers, we are also interested in exploring early childhood administrators' (i.e. directors and principals) perceptions of play as a mode for learning in relation to academic readiness.

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Children's Book Review

By Dina Costa Treff

One Whole Me



One Whole Me: A book about being biracial, written by Dia Mixon and illustrated by Natalia Jimenez Osorio, is a beautiful story of a child with parents of two different cultures, Colombian and African American. Throughout the story, cultures and heritages are shared and embraced. From food, music, and sports to languages and significant historical figures, it's bursting with pride in both countries. Spanish words and phrases are blended throughout the story, with a brief glossary at the end.

One Whole Me is a great book that introduces children to other cultures and allows them to see that people are unique. Mixon allows both cultures to shine and takes those two cultures to create the whole child. Although *One Whole Me* explores the experiences of one family, the BIPOC representation shown goes further to make an authentic story that is relatable for many. This story was written for Mixon's son, who is bicultural like the character in the book. *One Whole Me* is great for children ages 3-8 years old, grades Preschool-3rd Grade.

One Whole Me: Un libro sobre ser birracial, escrito por Dia Mixon e ilustrado por Natalia Jiménez Osorio, es una hermosa historia de un niño con padres de dos culturas diferentes, colombiana y afroamericana.

A lo largo del cuento, las culturas y las herencias son compartidas y aceptadas. Desde comida, música y deportes hasta idiomas y figuras históricas significativas, el cuento está lleno de orgullo por ambos países. Las palabras y frases en español se mezclan a lo largo de la historia e incluyen un breve glosario al final. *One Whole Me* es un gran libro que introduce a los niños a otras culturas y les permite ver que las personas son únicas. La autora hace que ambas culturas brillen y hace uso de esas dos culturas para manifestar como crear al niño completo. Aunque *One Whole Me* explora las experiencias de una familia, la representación birracial que se muestra va más allá para hacer una historia auténtica con la cual muchos se pueden identificar. Esta historia fue escrita para el hijo de Mixon, quien es bicultural al

igual que el personaje del libro. *One Whole Me* es ideal para niños de 3 a 8 años, desde preescolar al tercer grado.



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Let's Go Outdoors!

Wilma Melendez

Summer brings special opportunities for children to learn and enjoy. The warmer days invite everyone to experience the outdoors. The summer landscape calls us to explore and discover, offering a multitude of learning experiences for children of all ages. Summer is also a special time for toddlers and young preschoolers. In the classroom or at home, opportunities emerge for the youngest ones to continue building ideas and to learn about their environments.

There is a wealth of experiences for the youngest children to enjoy. It is important to remember that experiences outdoors also contribute to children's development across the domains. New names and words are learned as they explore and discover. Opportunities to explore what nature brings us are experiences that familiarize and give children a sense about their location. Developing a sense about location is also building a sense about their space, an important concept that contributes to their emerging sense of self and of belonging (Melendez & Beck, 2000).

Making the best of the outdoors begins with careful planning to ensure experiences are developmentally appropriate for the age group you teach. It also includes attention and careful consideration about each child's safety. Here are some suggestions for enjoying the outdoors with young children.

Know your outdoors: Safety is always the first step when planning to enjoy the outdoors with children. Even if you are familiar with your outdoor environment, it is always important to take time to check the surroundings. Every season always brings changes. Never take for granted that you already know what children would find. Summer weather also brings changes to your classroom outdoors and to what children may find.

New plants, blooming flowers, and even new animal visitors are not unusual to be found in the summer landscape. Taking the time to know what type of plants, shrubs, and flowers are in the landscape will help in preventing allergies and any other health risks. You also want to make sure to identify any other potential hazards that may need to be removed. Remember that a weekly check of your playground or outdoors is always essential to keep the area safe for young children.

Summer is also an invitation for new animal visitors. Taking the time to know who lives or visits your playground will be helpful in knowing

about any precautions needed to avoid any risk. It will also help you to know how to turn their "visit" into an exciting learning experience.

Safe sun exposure: Be mindful about the need to protect children from overexposure to the sun. Make sure that there are shaded or covered areas where children can be protected from the summer sun (Gilchrist, 2018). Have hats available to protect children while playing or exploring. Check your local health guidelines about the use of sunscreen to protect and prevent burns. This will help prevent children from sunburn and will make their experiences enjoyable. Limit their exposure to the sun and make sure to have water available to maintain their hydration.

Check your playground equipment. Any outdoor playground needs to be routinely checked to ensure safety. Using the lens of safety, take the time to check the equipment and any objects present in the playground environment. Because of weather exposure, it is important to always check the safety of outdoor equipment and of any other objects (National Safety Council, 2023).

Enhance their outdoor experience with toys and other objects: It is always important to consider ways to enhance the environment that will help invite children to explore and enjoy. For instance, choosing and bringing age-appropriate toys along with other materials creates "interest points" that serve as an invitation to play.



To make children's outdoor experience a special one, always plan something different for them to explore and enjoy. Perhaps it is learning about a new "visitor" that now lives outdoors or learning a new song. Bringing a story or having drawing materials for them to freely express themselves would also help make the experience a special one. Because summer weather patterns sometimes change quickly, be ready to have experiences children may be able to enjoy indoors, too. But what is most important, always make summer into an exciting learning experience for children!

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**Dimensions of Early Childhood
2024 Special Issue**

Call for Manuscripts

Diversity, Development, and Dedication: Celebrating SECA's 75th Anniversary
Submissions due: September 15, 2023

It was 1948 when a group of courageous early childhood educators, determined to address the diverse realities and development needs of young children, formed the *Southern Association of Children Under Six* (SACUS). Known today as the Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA), the organization has been a leader for over seven decades advocating for equity in practices that support young children's education and development. SECA's determination to responsively address the diverse needs of children and their families has been a guiding force for early childhood professionals encouraging and promoting their professional knowledge and ongoing development.

Celebrating SECA's 75 years of dedication and commitment to children, families, and professionals, this special issue explores and considers the work of early childhood professionals from the perspective of practices and policies essential to support children's development (Center for the Developing Child, 2007). It also focuses on factors motivating and influencing early educators' determination to advocate and embrace practices that responsively address children's cultures, experiences, and diverse needs (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Derman-Sparks, 2010). It also explores the factors influencing the determined efforts promoting the ongoing professional development of early childhood educators (Moses & Harrill, 2022). We are seeking manuscripts with a reflective focus that address the topics of diversity, determination and development in early childhood education.

Possible topics include the following as well as other related ones:

<i>Diversity and determined efforts to support children</i>	<i>Teacher preparation and children's development</i>
<i>Influence of diversity in children's development</i>	<i>Need for a diversity focus in teacher preparation</i>
<i>Role of early childhood educators in addressing diversity</i>	<i>Responding to the needs of children with exceptionalities: Successes and challenges</i>
<i>Integration of children's funds of knowledge</i>	<i>Models supporting early childhood teachers' professional development</i>
<i>Practices honoring children's lived experiences</i>	<i>Reflections on practices supporting children and families' diversities</i>
<i>Teaching practices with an equity focus in early education</i>	<i>Preparing educators to work with children in rural communities</i>
<i>Factors and practices supporting quality in early childhood education and programs</i>	<i>Policies and practices: Meeting the diverse language needs of children</i>

- Manuscripts should be 10-20 pages including references, double-spaced, and follow APA 7th
- Submit as a Word document and include a cover sheet.
- **Send your manuscript via email to editor@seca.info**
- For more detail on manuscript requirements, go to www.seca.info/dimensions

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