

ABBIE LIEBERMAN AND SHAYNA COOK

A FALSE DICHOTOMY:

Elementary Principals on Academics and Play



Academics and Play

Why Principals Matter

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About the Authors



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Contents

Introduction	2
How Principals Think About Early Childhood and Play	5
Analysis: Principals are Struggling to Break Free of the False Dichotomy of Play vs. Learning	8
Notes	10

INTRODUCTION

It was time for the kindergartners to choose their own activities, and each rose from his or her spot on the carpet and went in a different direction. Principal Greer,¹ clipboard in hand, noted the children's excitement. She followed a few students over to the block area, standing off to the side to observe. Saige, a girl with two long braids, took some cardboard bricks and began to pile them up. Isaiah helped her stack the blocks as high as their waists in a long line. Davonte stood on the other side of the brick wall. He was trying hard to put on an apron. Saige passed a red baseball cap to Davonte, saying, "you have to wear this too."

Greer moved in a little closer and asked the children what they were doing. Saige announced, "we're making an ice cream shop!" The classroom teacher, who was deftly moving around the room asking students questions, left the two children at the water table playing with measuring cups and moved over to the block area. By that time, Saige had put on a purse and some sunglasses. She reached into her purse and pulled out a few pieces of scrap paper. She handed the paper to Davonte and said, "I want two chocolate ice cream cones." Isaiah immediately disagreed, saying, "I don't want chocolate. I want vanilla." Davonte reached into a bucket with a wooden block and pulled out some crumpled up brown and white tissue paper. "Here you go!" Saige took the make-believe ice cream cones and handed the "vanilla" one to Isaiah.

The teacher chimed in, "Saige and Isaiah, you can ask Davonte for some toppings for your ice cream cone too! You could get sprinkles, hot fudge, or even a cherry." Pulling a picture book, *The Ice Cream King*, off the shelf, she showed the children some pictures of other toppings. Isaiah took hold of the book, flipping through the pages with Saige looking over his shoulder. Modeling language, the teacher pretended to be a customer: "Davonte, I would like three scoops of strawberry ice cream with some whipped cream and a cherry for the toppings, please." Davonte counted out three scoops of pink tissue paper and the other children proceeded to gather the toppings. The teacher stepped back to observe and let the children continue to play.

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Greer completed her notes and left the room smiling, reflecting on all the learning that she saw taking place in the classroom. While some principals might have looked at this room full of kindergartners and seen chaos, Greer realized that the children playing in the block area were working cooperatively towards a common goal. Instead of giving students a rote counting or vocabulary

lesson, the teacher built on their interests and incorporated language and literacy development by tying vocabulary from the book into play.

In this scenario, play was the primary vehicle for student-centered learning. And yet, findings from New America's focus groups (see box below) show that principals have very different ideas about what constitutes strong learning environments in pre-K through third grade. Many principals struggle to understand the appropriate balance between play-based learning and academics.

In early childhood education, teacher-scaffolded or guided play can skillfully and simultaneously integrate hands-on experience with direct instruction of learning objectives such as problem-solving, persistence, language development, or

A child cannot advance to a new skill or develop a deeper understanding of a concept if teaching methods do not take into account which skills she has or has not yet developed.

early math skills. This type of play-based learning, shown in many studies to be most effective at helping young children learn new skills and concepts,² is not always seen in pre-K through third grade classrooms. Some educators instead rely on instructional methods that are not designed with young children in mind. A child cannot advance to a new skill or develop a deeper understanding of a concept if teaching methods do not take

In Pursuit of a Better Understanding of Principals and Their Roles as Early Education Leaders

New America's Early and Elementary Education Policy team was interested in understanding principals' perceptions of what should take place in pre-K and early grade classrooms and if and how they see their role as early education leaders. To that end, New America commissioned the FDR Group, a nonpartisan public opinion research firm, to convene five focus groups around the country with elementary school principals to explore views about and experiences with PreK-3rd grade students, teachers, and classrooms.

The focus groups took place between February and April 2015, one each in San Francisco, New York, Minneapolis, Austin, and Orlando. The geographically-diverse groups answered questions on the staffing and hiring of teachers, the transition between pre-K and kindergarten, student assessment, professional development, and the role of the principal. The first two focus groups, in

San Francisco and New York, also included directors of early childhood programs in order to dig into the relationships between public school and non-public school programs. Specific examples of questions posed include: "What matters most when it comes to hiring a new PreK-3rd grade teacher or placing a teacher in an early grade classroom? What do you expect a child to know at the end of kindergarten or first grade? When it comes to literacy assessment, what kind of guidance do you give or training do you seek out for your staff? Do you see value in making connections between pre-K and K-3?"

In total, 46 educators participated, including 38 principals and two assistant principals in public elementary schools, plus six directors of pre-K programs (public and private). The FDR Group's report on our focus groups can be found at:

www.newamerica.org/education-policy/principals-corner

into account which skills she has or has not yet developed.³ For example, imagine trying to teach a child to ride a bike before he has developed a good sense of balance—how frustrating for both teacher and child. Young children are at a stage of cognitive and physical development that preferences

on academic skill development in a vacuum.⁴ Principals can be the architects or demolitionists of developmentally appropriate instruction because they set the vision for their schools’ instructional philosophy and practice.

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movement and exploration of their environment; they are not primed for “whole group” instruction that may require them to sit and listen for long periods of time.

In some cases, teachers themselves are not well-prepared to teach in the way that is best for young children. Other times, elementary school principals unwittingly set inappropriate expectations for instruction and learning. When principals understand the important role play can have in learning, they are better able to foster best practices among their teachers, allowing them to develop young children’s knowledge and skills across multiple domains of learning instead of focusing

Principals are responsible for observing classrooms, evaluating teachers, providing instructional leadership, leveraging talent for teacher leadership, and ensuring meaningful professional development opportunities. While teachers design lesson plans, principals weigh in on how these plans are executed, which is why it is essential that they know the best ways to deliver instruction for a wide range of age groups and developmental spans. As pre-K programs increasingly become school-based and more elementary schools offer full-day kindergarten, it is important for school leaders to have a strong foundation in child development and understand what instructional methods work best in pre-K through third grade classrooms.



HOW PRINCIPALS THINK ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD AND PLAY

Principals in New America’s focus groups, sometimes even those within the same school district, have varying understandings of early childhood education. When a principal from Orlando was asked how he would define early childhood education, he said, “I would say birth to age 5.” Another principal from the same city defined it as kindergarten through third grade. An Austin principal defined early childhood education as, “Pre-K to second grade.” In Minneapolis, a principal said, “early childhood for me would be before kindergarten.” These varying definitions of early childhood education can make it difficult for principals to understand and recognize the best strategies for learning during these years.

Many in our focus groups understood that play is essential for children. As one Minneapolis principal explained, “I think the benefits of creative play too . . . the creativity that is involved with that, the natural problem solving that kids learn to do through play, the socialization through play, there are a lot of things we lose a little when we take that away at this early age.” An Austin principal said that “play is so developmentally important” that she “push[es] for play because it [kindergarten] has become so academic.” Another Austin principal pointed out that she sees “a real deficit in [social-emotional skills] even in the later grades because

we didn’t give children enough time to play,” acknowledging one of the important long-term benefits of play.

A handful of principals appeared to not understand that play is an important instructional practice for teachers of young children. The majority, however, valued play but felt pressures—both real and perceived—to limit time for play in pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades in exchange for greater focus on academics, highlighting competing demands between academics and play. One Minneapolis principal said, “part of the issue is that so much more is expected of kindergarten today. It used to be not that big of a deal if a kid couldn’t write their name [in pre-K]. They would learn in kindergarten. Now they are coming out of kindergarten writing sentences, some of them. The range of skill has clearly grown.” An Austin principal lamented the loss of play and hands-on learning activities:

On the first day of school, the first graders sit down and they have a written problem in front of them that they have to solve. They [students] definitely get very high-level learning from them, but we are even missing that playing with manipulatives to understand math concepts, and it is very structured

even in first grade. They do well, they are successful, but I do feel like they are missing that social element too. And I think they're missing a strong learning aspect as well by just jumping right into something rigorous.

Many principals did not make the connection between play and learning; they did not understand that play and academic instruction can *and should* be one in the same. A recurring point of view was that play is important, but that there is not enough time for it due to the need to teach academic skills at an earlier age. An Orlando principal admitted, "I have to be honest. We don't have the kitchens or the house anymore in kindergarten because there was no time for that." And an Austin principal said she experienced "heartache about [children] not being able to play as much in first grade." Developing both academic skills and social-emotional skills are essential in pre-K through third grade, but some principals in our focus groups did not believe that both could be accomplished through various forms of playful learning and guided play scenarios that challenge children to explore new content areas and authentically test their knowledge. Instead, many principals said they felt that reducing time for play was a natural consequence of ensuring that children are on track to succeed academically, not factoring in that play promotes self-regulation skills that are essential for learning in the later grades.⁵

Principals in our groups offered a few explanations for this added academic pressure in the early years. The most common pressure cited was federal accountability measures. A Minneapolis principal explained, "when I was a principal 18 years ago versus now, because of NCLB [No Child Left Behind],⁶ demands and expectations of the state [were less. Now] . . . there's a pressure for people to drive our kids more so that there is less opportunity for kids to put on a play or do more of the creative stuff."

An Austin principal said, "I still ask why are we pushing abstract thought younger and younger when developmentally they are still in that concrete phase. That's what I ask every day. We are expecting

kindergartners to have a thinking process like adults, and I think it's just not seeing the forest from the trees [sic]." When he was asked where those expectations came from, he responded, "the state of Texas. It's a hundred percent based on assessment. It's just the reality of state assessments."

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There has also been a push for more rigorous standards for all students in recent years. Across the U.S., standards for students of all grade levels have been revised to ensure that high school graduates are prepared for college or ready to begin a career. A principal from Austin explained that "the expectations for them coming out of kindergarten two or three years ago" were different. Now "they've got to be to a certain level to be at the college-ready standard, to be able to be ready for first grade. So much more structure. Much more of a focus on academic strengths and foundations for math."

District leaders, at times, can exacerbate principals' confusion around play. As one Austin principal explained it, "just about the early literacy demands—we originally over-reacted and took our kitchens out of the kindergarten classes because there wasn't time to play house any more, but now they're pushing back in and saying, 'How do we integrate our centers to hit those academic cues?' Play is so developmentally important to those



kids.” One Orlando principal explained that she received mixed messages on what to do in early grade classrooms: “the county goes out and buys hundreds of worksheets for the kindergarten kids, but the teachers would feel they would get a bad evaluation if they did use [them]. We are not supposed to use them.” Another principal

from Minneapolis said, “we don’t have much autonomy as a principal. But I know as an [former] early childhood teacher and a parent that we are not really doing what’s in the best interest of our children in trying to get them to love reading and to be more proficient readers. I think that we are sort of working against those goals.”

ANALYSIS: PRINCIPALS ARE STRUGGLING TO BREAK FREE OF THE FALSE DICHOTOMY OF PLAY VS. LEARNING

While elementary principals may not be in each classroom every day, they do have the ability to ensure that young children experience developmentally-appropriate environments. They not only determine the school’s instructional philosophy, but they also are responsible for observing and evaluating teachers. The differing ways that principals view play in the early grades impacts what teachers teach and how children in their classrooms learn and develop. It is essential for principals to be able to identify what sound early learning looks like, yet our focus groups revealed that they have varying, and oftentimes limited, expertise in this area.

Lack of knowledge about early childhood education is one reason principals might not recognize appropriate instruction. Many of the principals in our focus groups came from upper elementary or even high school backgrounds and had not been exposed to child development research or play-based instructional strategies. This lack of knowledge can color how principals define early childhood and how they view age-appropriate

practice. For instance, if a principal believes that early childhood education ends prior to kindergarten, she may not be inclined to think that professional development or curricula labeled “early childhood” apply to kindergarten or the early grades. Or she may be less inclined to favor early childhood principles in classroom instruction for kindergarten through third grade and more apt to expect instructional techniques for older children. This could lead to excluding play as an appropriate instructional strategy, not recognizing how it benefits child development through third grade.⁷

Conversely, some principals clearly understood the importance of play, but perceived that there was less time for play-based learning opportunities because of the pressure they said they felt from federal accountability measures. Since 2001, the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has required all students to be tested in reading and mathematics starting in third grade. While most states do not require standardized testing in the pre-K through second grades, educators know that there are consequences if their students do not meet

third grade reading and math proficiency standards, such as the potential to be labeled a “failing school” and its attendant improvement strategies that can

that young children acquire the self-regulatory skills essential for succeeding in school, academically and socially.”¹⁶ As evidenced in Saige, Isaiah, and

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include replacing school personnel.⁸ The pressure for students to perform proficiently in third grade is often pushed down into the earlier grades, leading to attempts to make early grade classrooms look and operate more like later grades.

Consequently, research suggests that play, particularly up through third grade, has become less prevalent in classrooms.⁹ “Kindergarten is the new first grade” has become an adage. A recent study comparing public school kindergarten classrooms between 1998 and 2010 found that teachers held much higher academic expectations for their students in the more recent years.¹⁰ This is not necessarily a bad shift on its own. Cognitive science shows that children’s brains are developing at a rapid pace in the early years and that young children are capable of learning a great deal.¹¹

However, a preponderance of research has shown that there is a false dichotomy between more rigorous academic learning and play.¹² As Vivian Paley, a teacher-researcher puts it, “fantasy play is the glue that binds together all other pursuits, including the teaching of early reading and writing skills.”¹³ Students are more likely to learn important academic skills and content through play than by having teacher-directed instruction outside of a playful context, as with, for instance, the filling out of a worksheet.¹⁴ In fact, it is often the students who need more opportunities for guided play who often have the least exposure to it.¹⁵ Researchers Ageliki Nicolopoulou, Judith McDowell, and Carolyn Brockmeyer have stated, “rich opportunities for make-believe . . . are among the best ways to ensure

Davonte’s ice cream shop, children are constantly and simultaneously playing and learning.

With greater knowledge of child development and appropriate practices, principals would be more likely to understand that scaffolded play can and does lead to learning. Principals who know best practice in early education will be better able to support developmentally appropriate teaching.



Notes

¹ All of the names used in this narrative are fictional. This scenario is based on a classroom experience.

² Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, *Play = Learning: How Play Motivates and Enhances Children's Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18.

³ LaRue Allen and Bridget B. Kelly, eds., *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015), <http://www.nap.edu/read/19401/chapter/13>.

⁴ Domains of learning can include language, literacy, science, math, cognitive development, social and emotional development, and physical development.

⁵ Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, *Play = Learning: How Play Motivates and Enhances Children's Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 5.

⁶ New America, "No Child Left Behind," <http://atlas.newamerica.org/no-child-left-behind-overview>.

⁷ Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, *Play = Learning: How Play Motivates and Enhances Children's Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 1.

⁸ ESEA was recently reauthorized, and statewide third grade testing will still be required under the updated law, but states will have more flexibility when it comes to accountability systems.

⁹ Daphna Bassok, Scott Latham, and Anna Rorem, "Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?" *AERA Open* 1,

no. 4 (2016): 1–31, http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/20_Bassok_Is_Kindergarten_The_New_First_Grade.pdf.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ LaRue Allen and Bridget B. Kelly, eds., *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015), [55-206], <http://www.nap.edu/read/19401/chapter/6>.

¹² Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, *Play = Learning: How Play Motivates and Enhances Children's Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹³ Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, *Play = Learning: How Play Motivates and Enhances Children's Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 125.

¹⁴ Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, *Play = Learning: How Play Motivates and Enhances Children's Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 5.

¹⁵ Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, *Play = Learning: How Play Motivates and Enhances Children's Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 91–92.

¹⁶ Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, *Play = Learning: How Play Motivates and Enhances Children's Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 7.



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