

Introduction

In Illinois, the definition and implementation of play in kindergarten varies across classrooms, schools, and districts, creating confusion for teachers and schools attempting to implement play-based learning. Our colleagues in the Teach Plus Illinois Early Childhood Educator Policy Fellowship documented this confusion in their 2022 report, [*Implementing Play-Based Learning Across Illinois Kindergarten Classrooms: Recommendations from Teach Plus Early Childhood Fellows*](#), which examined the use of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms in four districts across the state. The report found that despite entire districts using play-based learning, the implementation varied across classrooms as teachers “implement play at their own comfort level.”

Confusion around what play means is a problem for Illinois’ teachers and our youngest learners. Theorists and play scholars have defined play in various ways, using different language to name play a vehicle to enhance children’s growth and learning across all developmental domains.. Rudolph Steiner, for example, proposed that young children learn best through immersion in “un-self conscious imitation of practical activities,” focusing on experiential education and imaginative play.¹ Jean Piaget divided play into three types of “play behavior,” practice play, symbolic play, and play-with-rules.²

As early childhood educators and 2021-2022 Teach Plus Illinois Early Childhood Educator Policy Fellows, we believe that play-based learning provides young children access to learning objectives and helps them construct their own knowledge through developmentally appropriate practices like the use of concrete materials, manipulatives, games, social interactions, reenactments, and experiences. Previous Fellows recommended bringing play-based learning into all kindergarten classrooms in Illinois, structuring an hour of uninterrupted self-initiated play by the child and an hour of guided play directed by the educator.

In this memo, we present the definition of play-based learning we developed using our own lived experiences as early childhood educators. We solicited feedback on our definition in focus groups with 33 professionals within early childhood education across the state.

Our hope is that the Illinois State Board of Education adopts this definition to guide school districts, administrators, and teachers in successfully implementing play-based learning in their kindergarten classrooms.

Play-Based Learning: Definition

Play-based learning is a developmentally appropriate approach to teaching and learning that uses play as an instructional tool in the classroom.³ It can be used in a one-on-one, small group, or whole-class classroom setting. “Play” as a tool can mean many different things, but can be categorized into two main categories: *guided play* and *student-initiated play*. *Guided play* is defined as intentional teacher-directed play with activities set up by the teacher that support whole class and small group lessons and are aligned to learning standards.⁴ *Student-initiated play* is defined as open-ended, child-selected opportunities for children to build, pretend, create, move, and explore.⁵

What Do IL Early Childhood Teachers Say About This Definition of Play?

We shared this definition of play-based learning with about 30 early childhood educators and stakeholders around Illinois, and solicited their feedback through focus groups. Overwhelmingly, our reviewers supported the definition. Here are some quotes highlighting the themes that emerged from their feedback.

"I like how the difference between guided play and student-directed [student-initiated] play is outlined with appropriate wording. Specifically, I like that guided teaching was defined as intentional teaching and self-directed [student-initiated] play was defined as student-initiated, open-ended, & child selected. I also think including the words build, pretend, create, move, & explore are essential to help educators and parents understand the rich experiences that occur during play."

-Kindergarten Teacher in Chicago, Illinois

"Love the two categories of play. One to one, small group and whole group is ideal. Self-direction is equally important. Pretend and explore and the choice of words are important. At this point it is CRUCIAL that the teacher observe how best to initiate and facilitate learning in the environment."

- Elementary School Teacher (K-5) in Batavia, Illinois

"Play-Based Learning (guided play) is an opportunity for students to experience self-directed [student-initiated] play choices; for teachers to call his/her students in a small group to teach them specific skills in an engaging way with an intentional purpose."

- CPS Preschool Teacher in Chicago, Illinois

ENDNOTES

1 Uhrmacher, P. Bruce (Winter 1993). "Making Contact: An Exploration of Focused Attention between Teacher and Students". *Curriculum Inquiry*. 23 (4): 433–444. [doi:10.2307/1180068](https://doi.org/10.2307/1180068). JSTOR 1180068

2 Bergen, Doris. "Psychological Approaches to the Study of Play." *American Journal of Play* 7, no. 3 (2015): 108–9. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1080018.pdf>.

3 Lillard, A.S., M.D. Lerner, E.J. Hopkins, R.A. Dore, E.D. Smith, & C.M. Palmquist. 2013. "The Impact of Pretend Play on Children's Development: A Review of the Evidence." *Psychological Bulletin* 139 (1): 1–34.

4 Weisberg, D.S., K. Hirsh-Pasek, R.M. Golinkoff, A.K. Kittredge, & D. Klahr. 2016. "Guided Play: Principles and Practices." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25 (3): 177–82.

5 Hirsh-Pasek, K., J.M. Zosh, R.M. Golinkoff, J.H. Gray, M.B. Robb, & J. Kaufman. 2015. "Putting Education in 'Educational' Apps: Lessons From the Science of Learning." *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 16 (1): 3–34.