

THE ACADEMIC VERSUS PLAY BINARY LIMITS THE PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY

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“We are not
STEPFORD
Teachers!”- Audrina

Introduction

Oklahoma Early Childhood Educators’ professional autonomy is impacted as a result of the academic versus play-based learning binary.

The research shows that accountability reforms constrain educators’ professional autonomy, undermining their ability to balance academic demands with play-based and social-emotional learning.

As a result, educators face challenges that affect their pedagogical autonomy and job satisfaction due to the academic versus play binary.

“The pressure to focus on academic performance at the expense of developmental appropriateness... is evident” (Nova).

Methods

The study employs a practitioner research method to explore the impact of accountability reforms on early childhood educators in Oklahoma.

Data was collected through surveys, interviews, and a collaborative inquiry community, offering a comprehensive analysis that captures current educators’ perspectives to identify barriers to developmentally appropriate practices and inform policy stakeholders.

“It felt unethical for me” when forced to adhere to standards that conflicted with her professional beliefs (Milani).

Professional Autonomy

Professional autonomy is educators’ freedom to choose content, materials, and methods, recognizing them as qualified professionals (Ref 1).

Core Findings

- Accountability reforms indoctrination laid the ground for the academic versus play binary, where the rhetoric of play is conceptualized as a nonacademic event rather than how young children learn.
- Early childhood educators felt a deep aversion to the academic vs. play divide that infiltrated their classrooms, overtook their practice, and denied them professional autonomy.
- Detached associations with philosophical principles, pedagogy and practice, and excludes professionalism they had in being trusted.

Educators’ Perspectives

“I think that when they, when you’re given a schedule from admin that says you’re going to do this for 45 mins and this 45 mins and it, it limits you” (Milani) and if a child is having a moment and “something happens and you want to stop...because even if you do it [stop], in the back of your mind you’re thinking, I need to be doing this” (Milani). Educators face internal turmoil, knowing a child’s needs are crucial, yet they second-guess themselves due to the pressures of accountability reforms within their profession.

“These [data requirements] impact the amount of time I can spend creating authentic learning experiences when I’m tied up in required curriculum that doesn’t incorporate play and assessing” (Survey, Response 24).

Real Effects

Educators reported extensive “seat work or whole group, sit on the carpet and listen” sessions (Audrina), with one curriculum demanding 90 minutes/day and another 45 minutes/day of whole group time (Audrina, Sarina, Constance, & Indie). The study revealed that 51% felt these mandated accountability reforms severely limit time for play-based learning.

Administration “do not want us to do centers” (Nova) which was the same sentiment felt by Audrina, Sarina, and Indie.

Implications

Trust educators as trained professionals.

Early childhood educators’ numerous times expressed that academic learning and play are one in the same and should be conceptualized as inextricable.

Narrow the policy-theory-practice gap that has been shown in early childhood classrooms.

“Politics, administrators who are not educated in early childhood and child development, push for young children to sit and perform like older students, [perceived as] lack of support for early childhood (Survey Response 21).”

References:

