

Teacher Research on Play and School Readiness

An interview with
Megan Arnim and Sandra Floyd

by Margie Carter



“Why is play so important in early learning?

Play has been likened to the inquiry-based approach of a scientist because both engage in ‘what if’ thinking. The child is continually trying out new possibilities and learns as much from failure and mistakes as from positive outcomes.

“It is this process that is of great importance to the child rather than the outcome. However, it is difficult to assess this process, which is one reason that play has fallen out of favor in schools. Creativity, curiosity, play, and problem solving are all intertwined in early childhood. Social negotiation is also frequently part of the mix.”

—Joan Almon (2013)



Megan Arnim currently works as a teacher and peer mentor at Epiphany Early Learning Preschool (EELP). She has been an active member in the ECE community in Seattle for nearly 20 years and is still constantly amazed by the children and

families that she meets through her work. Megan received her Washington state teaching credentials through Pacific Oaks College and is the proud mother of two beautiful girls.



Sandra Floyd has been in the early childhood field for nearly 20 years, primarily in Seattle. In addition to her teaching and mentoring role at EELP, she loves to visit schools all over the world. She has taught, presented, and learned from schools

across the United States, New Zealand, and Japan.



Margie Carter is a co-author of seven early childhood books and works as a consultant and mentor. These days much of her own learning comes from being with extremely thoughtful teachers like Megan and Sandra. She regularly leads study

tours to visit early childhood programs in New Zealand. To learn more about her work at Harvest Resources Associates, visit www.ecetrainers.com.

“A child’s greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality.

“What children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone.”

Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society* (1978)

In today’s world where early education is focused on ‘school readiness,’ advocates for a play-based early childhood curriculum struggle to be taken seriously. Their challenges are not only external views and expectations, but

genuine internal uncertainty about how to ‘do the right thing.’

- Is it really okay to just let children play all day?
- If you resist child assessments, how can you be sure the children are really learning and prepared to enter kindergarten?
- What really constitutes ‘school readiness’ and how do we support children’s learning without stealing their childhoods and innate desire to understand everything in the world around them?

Several key organizations have emerged with valuable resources to strengthen understandings and advocacy for play-based curriculum for very young children, most notably, the Alliance for Childhood and Defending the Early Years (see Resources). It is well worth the time to visit these websites regularly to stay informed about the growing efforts to support play as a core feature of children's learning.

The conversation I try to have with educators and their supervisors focuses on what we mean by *play* and the adult's role to support children's learning through play. In addition to the websites noted above, Lev Vygotsky's work (1978) is an important resource. I also like to reintroduce the ideas of Elizabeth Jones and Gretchen Reynolds in clarifying that it is complex play we want to provide for, and often need to scaffold, particularly for children who come to us screen-savvy, but lacking in experience with self-regulation, open-ended materials, and self-initiated play.

I encourage all programs, especially those working with a mandated curriculum and assessment tools, to avoid the trap of creating daily schedules with small time blocks that don't allow for complex play skills to develop. Research suggests that complex play requires at least 45 minutes, way beyond the small amount of 'free-play time' many teachers allow to serve as a recess or brief transition from teacher-directed activities aimed at school readiness. In my mentoring, we explore how any school readiness skills that aren't observed in children's engaged play can be accommodated by changes to the environment, along with attentive responsiveness and scaffolding of teachers. Upon examination, we sometimes discover that a better combination of materials in the environment will foster growing complexity in children's self-initiated play. Teachers may

need more insight into the scaffolding process and the kind of strategies and roles involved.

I also challenge educators to be clear about their values and to specifically define what they believe makes children truly successful in life and learning. Tom Drummond offers an example of this on his website (see Resources). He decries the limitations of common academic definitions of school readiness and implores us to consider expanded notions of desirable outcomes for children, drawing on their natural learning through engaged play.

The process of identifying how you see children learning through play is a powerful professional development experience in and of itself. You can design professional development with teacher research and reading assignments, supported by dedicated time with a mentor/pedagogical leader to guide and provoke conversation that uncovers how practice reveals or refutes learning theories.

Using Teacher Research as a Professional Development Tool

I've known teachers Megan Arnim and Sandra Floyd for many years, first in their work at Hilltop Children's Center and more recently as teachers and peer mentors in a newer center, Epiphany Early Learning Preschool (EELP), both in Seattle, Washington. Megan and Sandra, along with their director and entire staff, are committed to a play-based learning process, infused with translating inspiration from Reggio into concrete practices that foster inquiry and in-depth investigations, with an anti-bias lens. This past year they launched a very practical center-wide teacher research project to explore whether their play-based curriculum approach was indeed fostering school readiness.

Margie: How did you come to use teacher research as a central feature of the professional development you offer teachers at your center?

Megan: As peer mentors, Sandra and I set two goals for ourselves as we planned staff meetings and worked side by side with other teachers in our program. First, we wanted a center-wide research question to provide the focus for our monthly all-staff professional development time, making it both more efficient and more relevant to our daily practice. The second goal was that as we dug deeper into understanding how and what children learn from play, we would become more adept at communicating this understanding to parents.

It has taken us a couple of years to invent our way into having success with this. The first year, we tried to use each monthly staff meeting to look at how children used play to clarify their understanding of gender roles, particularly in their dramatic play. This was, and still is, a subject dear to many of our hearts, but we didn't really know how to formulate our research questions in a way that provoked a clear understanding for everyone about how to focus our observations and provocations. We discovered that without clear, well-written questions to guide what we were trying to uncover, our observations and analyses were all over the map, not terribly useful from a research perspective, and not helpful in keeping us focused on using this action research as a professional development focus throughout the year.

Margie: What an important discovery! I think finding the pressing questions within a center's practice is a learning task in and of itself: What is it we are really puzzled about, trying to get better at understanding and doing? Taking time to tease that out and settle on wording that is clear to everyone is

essential to taking up a focused inquiry that has a genuinely valuable outcome.

Megan: Exactly. So the second year, we got smarter with a research focus that grew out of questions we were constantly fielding from families both currently enrolled and considering enrollment. They all wanted reassurance that our approach was really providing a solid foundation for kindergarten. While we were telling families that play-based programs *do* provide children with the skills they need, we obviously weren't offering enough concrete evidence to satisfy them. So we shaped a research question to help us address this problem: "How does a play-based program such as ours support children's school readiness?" By choosing a question that was so much simpler, and at the same time extremely relevant to our families, we gave ourselves a framework that was broad enough and strong enough to support an entire year's worth of professional development work; at the same time, we deepened our day-to-day encounters with the children in our care.

Margie: What was your starting point for this research?

Megan: Well, after our previous experience of not everyone sharing the same understanding of the question, we decided to start by having the whole staff spend some time unpacking the phrase, 'school readiness.' What do each of us think this means, and how can we reclaim this idea as professionals committed to a play-based program? I've found that within ECE circles this phrase can mean a lot of different things to different people and can be the source of a great deal of heated debate. I wanted us to get beyond the confined sense that 'school readiness' simply means more standardized tests and regulations handed down by outsiders. I knew that all of the teachers on our staff care deeply that every child in their

care was ready for whatever comes next in their lives, although we might have different language to describe that. I wanted us to spend some time finding a common language about what we believed 'school readiness' meant, so that we could be consistent both about what we were studying, and how we would describe what we found to families.

Designing a Year-Long Study

Sandra: We decided to design the year's professional development with our research question in the forefront of our minds. Our research question is the overarching theme for every staff meeting, readings we distribute, and the study of some focused observations. We decided to start with the fundamentals and then build from there. We need a baseline:

- What is our collective understanding of a play-based curriculum?
- How do we specifically see learning through play happening in our classrooms?
- How are we writing about it in our documentation?
- How are we communicating this to our families?

From there, we continue to strengthen our understandings and practice, always with a parent perspective in mind. Each month we tackle one idea about play and school readiness. Typically we assign a related article and ask teachers to do some focused observations and reflections based on what they learned from the reading. These reflections get folded into a piece of documentation aimed at promoting conversations with families. Our findings are brought to our next monthly staff meeting for further dialogue.

Margie: The idea of giving 'homework assignments' with focused observations and reading really does enhance the

professional development aspect of the research. Do you think this has changed the level of collaborative learning among teachers and families in your center?

Sandra: Definitely. I think this is because the homework assignments keep the teachers grounded in our research question so that our conversations have a kind of 'evolution' to them. We are always challenging ourselves and always looking ahead. The different aspects of our research question challenge us to look at our children and families from different perspectives. We've found that each homework assignment gets us to dig a little bit deeper and everybody wants to share what she has learned. This leads not only to advancing individual understandings, but asks the community as a whole to go further. Because of our center-wide commitment and study, we all see our practice in a new light. We no longer see the children engaged in play without seeing all the amazing learning taking place. Teachers talk about this more and more and you see it throughout our documentation now. I think this kind of dialogue can elevate the field as a whole.

Finding Surprises

Megan: As we dug deeper into our inquiry, I was surprised by several things. First, we uncovered a significant body of research that supported the academic value of play-based programs; second, we amassed many specific examples of the learning actually taking place every day in the children's play; and third, we clarified that even in a child-initiated, play-based program, the teacher plays a significant role in the child's learning experience. I had always believed that children learned best through play, but it wasn't until we explored literature on the subject that I realized both how pervasive and how subtle that learning is. Sure, I could easily come up with wonderful stories

of children finding ways to incorporate written language into their dramatic play, and was always excited about the ways that numbers found themselves worked into children's everyday lives, but there's so much more to it than that! Through this research, I became acutely aware of the teacher's role in structuring the environment to actually deepen children's thinking and how our interactions can foster the development of more complex language.

Likewise, I simply hadn't been aware of how a classroom filled with rich, open-ended materials supported mathematical thinking in so many ways beyond counting. It was so exciting to suddenly see math thinking going on everywhere I looked! This discovery enriched my work, both as a children's teacher and as a peer mentor with colleagues in our center.

Margie: So, beyond your mentoring work, your conversations about your center's research question started to affect your own teaching practice as well.

Megan: For sure! I became so much more aware of how my interactions with children affected their learning. I had always believed in the power of play, but I had never really thought about the distinctions between free play, guided play, and directed play, and consequently, my role in children's play. Through our research, I became much more sensitive to how I could deepen children's thinking with careful questions about what they were exploring.

Engaging Parents and Other Teachers in Your Research

Margie: I know you made concerted efforts to engage parents in this research, which is not only essential for your partnership with them, but courageous when you knew this would bring up some controversy, if not a direct conflict of ideas about school readiness. Can

you offer an example of how families influenced your understandings in this research work?

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Megan: In my practice as a teacher, I've always shied away from giving children a lot of specific skill building. I've seen one of the most important parts of my job as defending children's 'right' to a childhood filled with free play and exploration. When I started talking to parents who had older children who had gone through our program about how well they felt their children had been prepared, I got some answers that really made me think. There was plenty of enthusiasm for how well their child could adapt to their new environment, for their ability to think critically, and for their well-developed social skills. But I'll never forget one mom who looked at me sort of sheepishly and admitted, "It would have been nice if he had known how to hold a pencil." I realized that it didn't have to be one thing or the other — that it was possible for children to have authorship over their learning while still gaining the practical skills that would make the transition into a more traditional academic setting smoother. I've discovered that when I am intentional about how I interact with children as they explore their world, I can offer

more of those fundamental 'school skills' in a natural, organic way without sacrificing my values around play and children's autonomy.

Sandra: Recently we gave a presentation at a conference about our teacher research and I was surprised by how many people from different schools want to learn about this process. I was also surprised by the new level of thoughtfulness about parent involvement, which wasn't the case a few years ago. You could talk about the topic, but now it has so much more weight to it.

Margie: I know you contacted your local elementary school. Did this impact the direction of your research?

Megan: That was something I was really excited about when we began this project. I wanted to be able to say to parents, "Yes, if your child goes to such and such school, we know just what her teachers will be looking for, and here's how our play-based program will get her ready for that."

I contacted several schools in our immediate area, both public and private. From a few I got initial responses of, "What a great idea! Can we get back to you on that?" but from most I got no response at all. It was a little disappointing, but we haven't given up. This year, we've decided to put together a team of parents and administrators who are going to contact representatives from those same schools so that we can include their voices in our research.

Providing Support at the Administrative Level

Margie: I'm guessing that your description of this teacher research is probably creating a deep longing among many readers here. For undertakings like these to become professional development for an entire staff, what work has to happen at the administrative level?

Supporting Math Exploration through Play

EELP All Staff Meeting, March 2014

Conducted by Megan Arnim

Overview: This month our research observations will focus on how we see children exploring math concepts and numbers through play. Teachers will share reflections of their own childhood experiences of learning mathematical concepts, practice identifying math learning through play, conduct a review of the assigned article, and work in learning communities to study their observations and ways to share their discoveries with parents.

Objectives:

- To raise the teachers' awareness of how math is used everyday by children in a rich play setting.
- To strengthen teachers' skill in describing math learning in observations of play.
- To think critically about our environments, materials, and teacher interactions in supporting children's math exploration, and in identifying next steps to support further learning.

Agenda:

- 3:45–4:00 pm Reflective Writing:
- Do you remember learning about math as a very young child?
 - Did you see yourself as 'good' or 'bad' at it?
 - Did your relationship with math change over time?
 - If so, why do you think that happened?
- 4:00–4:20 pm Opening:
Debrief and invite folks to share their reflective writing.
Ask the question: "Is there a difference between 'school math' and 'home math'?"
- 4:20–4:50 pm Large group activity:
View a video clip of children playing. Identify the mathematical concepts the children are exploring. Brainstorm possible 'next steps' for supporting ongoing exploration.
- 4:50–5:20 pm Small group activity:
Discuss the article "Math Play: How Young Children Approach Math" by D. H. Clements and J. Sarama in light of their classroom observations of math learning, considering additional teacher actions. Practice writing a paragraph to families that describes the children's learning and plan to include this in a piece of posted written documentation.
- 5:20–5:30 pm Closing: Introduce next month's focus, "Executive Function," and explain the homework assignment.



Photographs by the authors



Megan: I'd say that the number one thing that has made this work possible is having a shared vision with our executive director about the value of ongoing professional development and a belief in the importance of teacher research. Without that support from the top, we might not have had the time and resources needed to sustain our work. Certainly it would have been very hard to do this work without regular planning time and time outside the classroom when team members could meet and share their notes and observations.

Margie: Your director, Julie Bisson, has been awesome in creating support systems backed by a budget that provides you two as part-time mentors, substitutes for teachers to study their documentation with your pedagogical guidance, and early closure once a month for meetings devoted to professional development. Her "let's figure out how to make this happen" approach is such a valuable example for other directors.

Sandra: Agreed! You have to have the full commitment — not only of staff, but of the admin team. If you ask teachers to use their precious time to observe play and then reflect on its meaning, you have to provide concrete support with time, technology, and mentoring. Every second of a teacher's day is stretched and valuable and we have to feel the confidence of our supervisors in order to take our practice to a new level. This work is challenging and we need the support of others — someone who can listen, hold you accountable, and understand how you feel. All of this takes time and money. We need someone who can make room in the budget. We need someone who can make room for support.

Megan: I think that for teachers who are longing to explore ongoing research projects in their own classrooms but who don't have the kind of adminis-

trative support that we have, it would be essential to find or build some sort of community of practice. Ideally this would be with other teachers, but I can imagine creating that kind of community with parents as well, particularly if the teacher already had a practice of asking parents to help in the classroom, such as in a parent/teacher co-op.

Conclusion

Sandra: As early childhood educators, we value the work that we do and hold a deep commitment to our practice. This is our chosen field of work and we want to grow and sustain our careers. Using teacher research for our professional development deepens our knowledge and strengthens our ability to be advocates for children's play.

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Research, Resources, and Advocacy Toolkits

Alliance for Childhood:

www.allianceforchildhood.org

Other valuable resources include a fact sheet, "Twelve Key Types of Play," and a beautiful poster on childhood.

Defending the Early Years:

<http://deyproject.org>

Tom Drummond:

<http://tomdrummond.com/16-capabilities/>

Since his retirement, Tom has developed an ever-expanding website with a wide range of easy to access resources that when carefully studied could be equivalent to earning a degree in child-centered, values-based education for democracy. One of the best gatherings of practical resources available including video clips, handouts, and discussions on various aspects of learning to be a teacher and leader.

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