

Children's engagement in play at home: a parent's role in supporting play opportunities during early childhood

By: Doré R. LaForett & [Julia L. Mendez](#)

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Abstract:

This study examined parents' developmentally appropriate beliefs about young children's play and parents' views on their child's play skills. This exploratory secondary data analysis was drawn from data on low-income African-American and Latino parents and their children ($n = 109$) participating in Head Start programmes in the USA. Compared with African-American parents, Latino parents were more likely to endorse play as valuable (Play Support) for promoting preschool children's social skills and school readiness, yet were also more likely to see play as not as important as academic readiness activities (Academic Focus). Parental endorsement of Play Support beliefs positively related to children's interactive play skills; Academic Focus beliefs negatively related to interactive play. These relations emerged for African American, but not Latino, children. Implications for understanding how culture may intersect with parents' play beliefs, opportunities to promote children's play competence, and alignment with play-based pedagogies are discussed.

Keywords: Play | parent beliefs | culture | low income | Head Start

Article:

Play is a naturally occurring context for development during the early childhood period. Through play with others, children are exposed to a language and experience of social interaction that is novel, exciting, frivolous, and magical. However, the value of play for children's development has been much debated and dissected within the empirical and theoretical literature. Research has established specific contributions of play to social and cognitive development via meta-analysis (Fisher, 1992) as well as documented the nature of skills required to sustain high-quality play interactions (Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014; Mendez, McDermott, & Fantuzzo, 2002). For example, children come to understand turn-taking and encounter opportunities for expressing and

regulating powerful emotions (Fantuzzo, Coolahan, Mendez, McDermott, & Sutton-Smith, 1998; Pelligrini, 1992). Adults in the child's life often serve as a valuable guide in this process, as they are equipped to scaffold emerging play skills of the child during the early developmental years (Bulotsky-Shearer, McWayne, Mendez, & Manz, 2016).

To advance the knowledge base, for several decades a group of researchers has been studying and describing the play behaviours of low income, ethnic minority children in the USA who attend Head Start programmes (Bulotsky-Shearer, McWayne, et al., 2016; Fantuzzo et al., 1995). Head Start is an early intervention programme that seeks to strengthen children's developmental outcomes for a population of children at risk for academic and social difficulties due to negative consequences of poverty. The conceptualization and empirical examination of children's play within this early intervention programme has focused on the necessary conditions or contexts under which children's successful play experiences with peers emerge, despite threats to development associated with poverty (Fantuzzo et al., 1995). For example, children's interactive peer play is enhanced through attainment of optimal levels of emotion regulation and language during play (Cohen & Mendez, 2009) as well as having an adaptable temperament (Mendez, Fantuzzo, & Cicchetti, 2002). Classroom features, such as teachers who create organized and predictable learning environments, have been associated with more favourable academic outcomes for children who are disengaged from peer play during early childhood (Bulotsky-Shearer, Bell, & Domínguez, 2012). Therefore, play opportunities with adults and children have been conceptualized as occasions for fostering growth and development for children (Jiang & Han, 2015), as well as strategies for ensuring that negative impact of poverty is mitigated by ensuring low-income at-risk children are offered high quality, stimulating play interactions (Bulotsky-Shearer, McWayne, et al., 2016).

However, classroom play opportunities with peers that are available via participation in early care and education (ECE) programmes such as Head Start may be less effective in promoting development if low-income children enter these environments ill-equipped to take advantage of the play. There is a need to gain a better understanding of adults' beliefs about young children's play, how these beliefs may be shaped by culture, and together how these factors may facilitate or perhaps even limit children's play opportunities and subsequent play competence. Thus, the purpose of this study is to better understand what play looks like for low-income children from the view of their parent. To do this, we examine parent beliefs about the importance of play or value of play for children's development and reports of children's actual play experiences, in terms of engaged, interactive peer play, or disruptive or disengaged peer play with others in the home and neighbourhood setting as reported on by parents themselves. By understanding more precisely those types of play experiences children are having outside of their ECE programmes, we can obtain a more complete picture of their development. We focus on low-income families, specifically African-American and Latino parents, to expand the field's cultural lens on how adults contribute children's play skills

Background and conceptual framework

A leading child care expert recently underscored the importance of acknowledging the 'dispositions and communicative skills, practices developed within their [children's] home

cultural community, their relationships with caregivers at home' (Howes, 2016, p. 5) which impact children's development and eventually their experiences within early intervention programmes. For low-income, ethnic minority children, such routines and behaviours may be disconnected from those practices that are common within ECE settings, including standards and approaches used by teachers to foster interactive peer play (Fantuzzo, Mendez, & Tighe, 1998). Thus, to better conceptualize the experience of play, we need a wider lens to describe the play experiences of young children in multiple cultural contexts, especially those outside of ECE settings which have been overlooked in contemporary play research. Several scholars have underscored similar concerns for the study of play among children, noting the critical importance of the child's immediate cultural context as establishing parameters for the types of activities and formative influences that will shape their development (Gaskins, 1994; Rogoff, 2003). Therefore, recent conceptualizations of children's play during early childhood explicitly consider the role of the context (e.g. home, community or ECE setting), as well as the adults and peers within these settings, and how the parent's perspective on these interactions and opportunities may facilitate or hinder play (LaForett & Mendez, 2016).

Parents as a cultural influence on children's play experiences

Cultural context influences the types of experiences and opportunities children have for engaging in play, serving to determine the outcomes that members of a culture value and nurture (Fogle & Mendez, 2006; Ogbu, 1999). Therefore, an essential understanding of play and the emergence of quality play experiences for low-income ethnic minority children in particular should consider parents as key influences on children's play. Although relatively understudied in the literature, a small body of work has examined how parental beliefs about play may relate to the degree to which children both experience positive play experiences in the home or community, as well as whether these experiences would facilitate their entry in peer play experiences in an early intervention programme. Parents who were exposed to play themselves as children, or somehow have also acquired favourable views about the value of play in promoting children's development should be more disposed to access and support play experiences, across all cultures. The nature of the play may vary; however, the common element across cultures would be that play somehow is enjoyable and also may facilitate future development (Fogle & Mendez, 2006). Parents who are disconnected from these ideas, or whose ideas about play differ, would have a different influence potentially on children's ability to enjoy, access, and benefit from play with adults and also subsequently with peers.

Bulotsky-Shearer, McWayne, et al. (2016) report on mothers who changed from a view of play as insignificant and wasteful relative to time spent in academic develop to an endorsement of play as meaningful for education and development of their Head Start child. This research showed that parent play beliefs were an important determinant of the types of learning experiences that children access, particularly those involving play with other children. Moreover, immigrant families could bring their existing views about play to an American context of early intervention for low-income children; therefore, the examination of parent beliefs about play and parent reports of children's play behaviour would be essential data for a deeper understanding of the play experiences of all children. In the present study, we are able to draw contrasts between

two of the largest groups served by Head Start programmes in the USA – African-American families, and Latino immigrant families (Child Trends, 2014).

Prior study of parent beliefs

Two foundational studies have been conducted on parent play beliefs with parents of low-income children attending Head Start programmes in the USA. First, Fogle and Mendez (2006) developed a measure of parent play beliefs (Parent Play Beliefs Scale; PPBS) and validated two key constructs, Play Support and Academic Focus. This measure asks parents to rate how strongly they agree or disagree with statements about play for their child. The Play Support subscale assesses beliefs of parents that play is enjoyable and meaningful for children to acquire a range of developmental benefits during early childhood. The Academic Focus subscale reflects beliefs that play tends to be irrelevant to children's social and cognitive development, and parents view other academic readiness experiences such as teaching and reading as more critical for supporting child development. This study also showed that Play Support beliefs were positively associated with parent and teacher reports of African-American children, as well as an adaptable child temperament. Recommended future directions were to replicate these findings, and to further explore the contributions of children's skills in contributing to their own play abilities. In a second study involving a different sample of Head Start children, LaForett and Mendez (2016) reported associations between Play Support and responsive parenting, which was defined as high levels of warmth and responsiveness, and low levels of hostility. Additionally, this study found that parents with higher scores for Play Support beliefs had higher parent efficacy and lower levels of depression. Taken together, these results suggest that Play Support beliefs may be related to a positive parenting approach that is more likely to facilitate the development of children's play abilities.

Parental reports of children's play: the Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale

A rating system that captures parent and teacher views of play experiences of Head Start children was developed and validated through a series of empirical studies (see Bulotsky-Shearer, Manz, et al., 2012 for review). First, children's play was observed by research teams, parents, and teachers. Items for the rating scale were derived from play behaviours that differentiate successful play episodes with engagement in play by children from disengaged play. The resulting rating system has a teacher and parent form that asks that the informant provide information about 32 different play behaviours. Three reliable and valid dimensions of children's peer play with others are derived from this instrument. In the present study, we utilize the parent report of three scales. *Play interaction* captures the positive, prosocial behaviours that are evident among children who play well with others. *Play disruption* consists of items regarding aggressive or negative actions that interfere with ongoing play with others. *Play disconnection* captures behaviours such as watching play, hovering, or having trouble entering play with other children that reflect disengagement from the play experience. Prior research using the parent PIPPS has shown this measure is predictive of children's expressive and receptive language abilities over an 8-month period (Mendez & Fogle, 2002). Another study showed that children's play in the home and community context predicted observed emotion regulation in the classroom setting and teacher reported academic motivation and attention skills

(McWayne, Fantuzzo, & McDermott, 2004). Therefore, this research shows that capturing parental reports of children's play in the home and community is essential to obtaining a more complete picture of a given child's play repertoire or capacity.

Gaps in the literature on play beliefs and children's play

To date, the study of play beliefs using the PPBS has been primarily limited to low-income children in the USA, with outcomes only examined for African-American child samples (for an exception involving Chinese American children, see Jiang & Han, 2015). Therefore, we need to more closely examine the utility of measures of play beliefs with more ethnically diverse samples of low-income preschool age children. Additionally, we need a deeper understanding of how play beliefs and academic readiness views might predict child play outcomes, particularly as we acknowledge that children's prior experiences with play may engage or serve to disconnect children from play within the ECE settings they attend in the USA. Lastly, as recommended by Howes (2016) and Bulotsky-Shearer, McWayne, et al. (2016), we need a rich understanding of the home and community influences on the child's peer group, and how these contexts are navigated by children and their families upon entry into preschool.

Overview of the study and research questions

This study contributes to this special issue on Reconsidering Play in the Early Years by focusing a cultural lens on the parent perspective of play. We seek to accomplish this goal by examining the relation between parent beliefs about play and parental reports of children's peer play within their homes and neighbourhood for using a diverse sample of low-income children, both African American, U.S. born children and Latino, U.S. born children living within recently arriving immigrant families. Specifically, we examined differences in play beliefs according to the cultural background of the parents. Next, we report on the relations between beliefs and play skills of the children in terms of engaged, interactive peer play or less adaptive peer play that is disruptive or disconnected. Our research questions add to the literature on parental beliefs and views of children's play to inform a more complete picture of the development of low income, at-risk children. Our research questions were:

1. Are there group differences in beliefs about the value of young children's play and perceptions of children's play for African-American and Latino parents of pre-schoolers participating in Head Start in the USA?
2. What are the associations among play beliefs, children's play skills, and key child characteristics (i.e. child age and gender)? Are these associations different between cultural groups?
3. Do parent play beliefs predict children's play skills, after accounting for child age and gender? Are there different patterns of prediction for African-American and Latino families?

Methods

Participants

The data for this exploratory study were drawn from two larger studies examining parent involvement and children's school readiness among young children participating in Head Start programmes in the USA. Children who were identified as either African American or Latino, and whose parents had completed ratings of parent beliefs, were selected for the present analyses ($n = 109$). Demographic information was obtained via phone interviews with the child's parent, 91% of which were with the child's biological mother, stepmother, foster mother, or the female partner of the child's father. The sample was relatively equally split between African-American (46%) and Latino (54%) children, with the African-American sample drawn from the Southeastern USA and the Latino sample obtained in the Northeastern USA. On average, children were just under 4.5 years of age ($M_{\text{age}} = 53.1$ months; $SD = 7.2$), and half of the children were boys (50%). Over two-thirds of parents were employed (36% full-time and 31% part-time), and 41% of parents were married. Just over half of parents reported that they were educated in the USA (51%); most parents of Latino children were not educated in the USA (85%), though the majority of the children were born in the USA. When education was reported, the most commonly reported educational attainment was some college (18% across the full sample).

Measures

Parent play beliefs

The PPBS (Fogle & Mendez, 2006) was used to assess parents' views about the function of play in their child's development. Developed with a sample of African-American children in Head Start, the PPBS contains thirty 5-point Likert-type items (1 = disagree, 5 = very much agree) that yield two subscales: Play Support and Academic Focus. The Play Support subscale reflects beliefs that play is an enjoyable activity with the potential to offer a range of developmental benefits to children. A representative item from the Play Support subscale is: 'Play can help my child develop better thinking abilities.' The Academic Focus subscale reflects beliefs that play tends to be irrelevant to children's social and cognitive development, thereby suggesting parents may implicitly value more academically oriented activities. A representative Academic Focus item is: 'I do not think my child learns important skills by playing.' The range of scores of the Play Support subscale is 16–80, whereas the range is 8–40 for the Academic Focus subscale. Internal consistency for both subscales ranges from high to moderate (validation study with African-American children: $\alpha = .90$ and $.73$, original study of culturally diverse immigrant families [$n = 70$] from which the Latino sample was drawn: $\alpha = .88$ and $.68$, respectively).

Peer play

The Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale – Parent Version (PIPPS; Fantuzzo, Mendez, et al., 1998) was used to capture parent ratings of children's engagement and disengagement in play at home or in the neighbourhood. This parent measure uses 32 items to capture children's play behaviours that facilitate and promote positive play experiences, or serve to hinder or interfere with play with other children. Multiple factor analytic studies of both the parent and teacher version of the PIPPS (Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott, 2000; Fantuzzo, Coolahan, et al., 1998) have shown support for three underlying dimensions of peer play, Play Interaction, Play Disruption, and Play Disconnection. In the present study, we use Play Interaction, a subscale that

contains items measuring children's creative, cooperative, and adaptive behaviours that facilitate play. We also use Play Disruption, a subscale that consists of negative and aggressive behaviours children display during play, and Play Disconnection, a subscale that contains items measuring children's avoidance behaviours that impede play, including hovering near play, watching or having trouble engaging in play. Psychometric properties of the PIPPS show Cronbach's alpha with acceptable internal consistency and this measure was predictive of children's school readiness over an 8-month period of time (Mendez & Fogle, 2002). The PIPPS has been used to study Spanish and English speaking Latino children enrolled in Head Start (Bulotsky-Shearer, López, & Mendez, 2016), and the parent and teacher PIPPS have been validated and are comparable measures (Coolahan et al., 2000). Scores are calculated on a *t* distribution with a range spanning two standard deviations from the mean (mean = 50, SD = 10). For this sample, there were 24 children whose scores did not reach a high enough threshold to generate a *t*-score for the Play Disconnection variable, and therefore those cases were not included in analyses examining this variable.

Procedures

The original studies from which the data were drawn were conducted in accordance with university IRB approvals. Procedures included the following: permissions from Head Start programme administrators; approvals from the Head Start programme parent policy council; and review of measures by the parent leadership of the programme. Data from parents including family demographic information, parents' play beliefs, and parents' ratings of their child's play were collected via phone interviews conducted with parents by trained data collectors. Latino parents were given the option of having the interview conducted in Spanish by a bilingual interviewer, with the majority of Latino parents completing the interview in Spanish. The data for the present study were collected during the second half of the school year.

Analytic approach

Our primary research question was to better understand the influence of parents' play beliefs on their perceptions of their child's play skills. Descriptive statistics (i.e. means and standard deviations for continuous variables; frequency counts for categorical variables) were conducted for the full sample and for the African-American and Latino samples separately. For continuous variables, group differences were tested for significance using a series of one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), where African Americans were the reference group. Chi-square tests were used to examine differences between categorical variables. Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated separately for each group. When significant correlations emerged for either group, this was followed by Fisher's *z*-test to examine whether the correlation for the African-American sample was statistically significant from the correlation for the Latino sample following procedures outlined by Knight and Hill (1998). Finally, separate hierarchical regression models for each group were used to examine whether parents' play beliefs (i.e. Play Support factor, Academic Focus factor) predicted children's play (i.e. Play Interaction, Play Disruption, Play Disconnection). Predictor variables were entered in the following steps: (1) child covariates (i.e. age in months, gender) and (2) play belief indicator (i.e. Play Support,

Academic Focus). Due to the large proportion of parents who had not completed their education in the USA, parent education was not included as a covariate in the regression analyses.

Results

Descriptive statistics and group differences

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analyses. Children in the African-American sample were approximately 5 months older than children in the Latino sample, which was a significant difference as tested with ANOVA, $F(1, 106) = 13.51, p < .001, d = 0.71$. There were about 8% more boys in the Latino sample relative to the African-American sample; however, a Chi-square test did not reveal a significant difference. For the play beliefs variables, overall parents endorsed higher levels of Play Support and lower levels of Academic Focus relative to the scale means. Compared with African-American parents, Latino parents reported higher endorsement of beliefs indicating that play is important for children’s learning (Play Support), as well as greater endorsement that play is less valuable for children’s learning (Academic Focus), $F(1, 107) = 6.65, p = .011, d = 0.50$ and $F(1, 107) = 81.32, p < .001, d = 1.77$, respectively. For the child peer play skills outcome variables (i.e. Play Interaction, Play Disruption, Play Disconnection), on average parents reported their children to be within one standard deviation of the scale mean. There were no ethnic group differences on the peer play skills variables.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and group comparisons for regression variables.

					African American (n = 50)			Latino (n = 59)			Full (n = 109)		
Variable	Source	Scale mean	Min	Max	Mean/f req.	SD	Range	Mean/f req.	SD	Range	Mean/F req.	SD	Range
Child age (months) ***	Parent	-	36	71	55.72	7.04	42-65	50.88	6.64	38-63	53.12	7.21	38-65
Child gender (% male)	Parent	-	-	-	46%	-	-	54%	-	-	50%	-	-
PPBS academic Focus***	Parent	24.0	8	40	14.18	5.04	8-33	23.32	5.46	13-34	19.13	6.96	8-34
PPBS Play Support*	Parent	48.0	16	80	67.68	6.76	52-80	71.39	8.05	40-80	69.69	7.68	40-80
PIPPS-P Play Interaction	Parent	50.0	30	70	48.80	10.89	23-72	47.22	12.05	10-70	47.95	11.51	10-72
PIPPS-P Play	Parent	50.0	30	70	48.51	10.57	27-66	47.31	7.85	29-64	47.84	9.11	27-66

Disruption													
PIPPS-P Play Disconnection ^a	Parent	50.0	30	70	47.15	9.16	37-63	46.10	8.17	33-61	46.51	3.53	33-63

PIPPS-P, Penn Peer Interactive Peer Play Scale – Parent; PPBS, Parent Play Belief Scale. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. ^a $n = 84$, due to cases with scores too low to generate a t-score.

Associations among variables and group equivalence

Table 2 reports Pearson correlations among the study variables. The top of the diagonal displays correlations for the Latino sample, whereas the bottom of the diagonal shows correlations for the African-American sample. For both African-American and Latino parents, beliefs that play is not important for children’s development (Academic Focus) were positively related to child age. However, these correlations were not significantly different from one another, suggesting that this association is not stronger for a particular group ($z = 0.13, p = .896$). In addition, Play Support beliefs were positively associated with child gender in Latino families, where increased endorsement of these beliefs was stronger for parents when the child was female versus male. This correlation, although also negative but not significant for African-American families, was not significantly different between the two groups ($z = 0.88, p = .379$).

Table 2. Correlations among regression variables for African-American and Latino samples.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	–
1. Child age	-	-0.05	0.27*	-0.04	-0.07	0.17	0.23
2. Child gender	0.09	-	0.05	-0.34**	-0.02	-0.14	-0.19
3. Academic Focus	0.30*	-0.03	-	-0.10	-0.07	0.13	0.22
4. Play Support	-0.09	-0.17	0.06	-	0.09	0.08	-0.21
5. Play Interaction	0.11	-0.04	-0.30*	0.31*	-	0.06	-0.09
6. Play Disruption	-0.13	0.01	-0.18	-0.18	-0.40**	-	-0.57**
7. Play Disconnection ^a	0.01	-0.03	0.20	0.13	-0.30	0.16	-

Note: Correlations for the African-American sample in the bottom diagonal ($n = 50$); correlations for the Latino sample in the top diagonal ($n = 59$). * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ ^a $n = 84$, due to cases with scores too low to generate a t-score

For associations between parents’ play beliefs and children’s play skills, endorsement of Academic Focus beliefs was associated with lower ratings of children’s play interaction skills, whereas Play Support beliefs were associated with higher ratings of children’s play interaction skills. These associations only emerged for the African-American sample, and were not

significantly different from the associations for the Latino sample ($z = -1.21, p = .226$ and $z = 1.17, p = .246$, respectively).

Finally, there were significant correlations between some of the indicators of child play skills for each cultural group. There was a negative association between interactive and disruptive play for African-American families, which was not observed for Latino families. These correlations were significantly different between the two groups, $z = -2.44, p = .015$. In addition, for Latino families, disruptive play behaviours were positively correlated with disconnected play behaviours; a positive correlation for African-American families was also observed but was not significant. Still, the correlations between the two groups were significant ($z = -2.47, p = .014$).

Hierarchical regression analyses: play beliefs predict peer play interaction

A series of hierarchical regression analyses was conducted to examine whether parents' play beliefs predicted parents' perceptions of their child's play skills. For each separate regression model, one of the subscales from the Parent PIPPS was the designated outcome. No regressions involving Latino parents were significant, and are not presented further.

Overall, parent play beliefs were a significant predictor for models using Play Interaction as the dependent variable. Play Disruption and Disconnection are not discussed further, as these models were not significant. African-American parents who endorsed play as important for their children's learning (Play Support) rated their child as having stronger play interaction skills after accounting for child age and gender. Table 3 displays the unstandardized predictor beta weights, parameter estimates, standard errors, and ΔR^2 for the individual predictor variables at each step of the equation. Together, this constellation of variables did not significantly account for the variance in Play Interaction $F(3, 46) = 1.96, p = .134, \text{adj. } R^2 = 0.06$. Further, African-American parents who did not think that play was important for children's learning (Academic Focus) tended to rate their children as less skilled in engaging in interactive play with peers. Similar to the Play Support model, the constellation of variables that included Academic Focus did not significantly account for the variance in Play Interaction $F(3, 46) = 2.38, p = .082, \text{adj. } R^2 = 0.08$.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression of parent beliefs about play predicting African-American children's play interaction skills.

Predictor	Play beliefs indicator					
	Play Support ^a			Academic Focus ^b		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Step 1						
Constant	39.80	12.60		39.80	12.60	
Child age	0.17	0.23	0.11	0.17	0.23	0.11
Child gender	-0.97	3.15	-0.05	-0.97	3.15	-0.05
Step 2						
Constant	2.22	20.44		41.74	11.96	
Child age	0.20	0.22	0.13	0.34	0.22	0.22
Child gender	0.19	3.06	0.01	-1.44	2.99	-0.07

Play beliefs indicator	0.52	0.23	0.32*	-0.79	0.31	-0.37*
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* $p < .05$. ^a $R^2 = 0.01$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = 0.10^*$ for Step 2. ^b $R^2 = 0.01$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = 0.12^*$ for Step 2.

Discussion

Young children's play is shaped by the experiences they live, which includes the influence of cultural context. This exploratory secondary data analysis sought to further our understanding of how parents' beliefs about young children's play relate to parents' perceptions of their child's play skills. By studying this issue in African-American and immigrant Latino low-income families, these findings suggest that there may be variability in how parents from different cultural backgrounds conceptualize play as a learning context for young children and how they judge their child's play competence.

Adding to the small body of literature on parents' play beliefs, among African-American parents, greater endorsement of academic readiness beliefs were related to lower ratings of their child's play skills. Conversely, parents who rated their child as showing high levels of interactive peer play also saw play as important for children's learning. These findings replicate the pattern found in Fogle and Mendez's (2006) original study of the PPBS conducted with another low-income sample of African-American families participating in Head Start in the same region of the USA as those African-American families in the present analyses. Moreover, hierarchical regression analyses showed that the correlations between the two play beliefs with interactive play remained significant after accounting for child age and gender. Although not significant, negative associations between Play Support and disruptive play and positive associations between Academic Focus and disconnected play mirrored those found in Fogle and Mendez (2006).

Associations between parents' play beliefs and children's play skills were not replicated for the Latino families in our sample. There were cultural differences between the two groups on the different play beliefs variables and on some of the play skills variables. Specifically, Latino parents in our study were more likely than African-American parents to endorse play as important for children's learning (Play Support factor). Yet at the same time, Latino parents also more often endorsed beliefs suggesting that play is irrelevant to young children's learning and that they are better served by more formalized and structured activities that promote learning (Academic Focus factor). That Latino parents seem to be endorsing both types of play beliefs may be a departure from and also a confirmation of Farver and Howes's (1993) study comparing Mexican and U.S. born mothers on their values regarding adult-directed play; in that study, the majority of Mexican parents viewed play as primarily an amusement activity for children whereas White, American mothers reported that play was important for providing educational benefits to their children. Further, African-American parents' endorsements of Play Support and Academic Focus were significantly positively and negatively related to ratings of Play Interaction, respectively, and no such significant associations were observed for Latino parents. However, the magnitude of these differences between the two groups was stronger for the association between Academic Focus and Play Interaction than that between Play Support and

Play Interaction. That is, there seems to be more discrepant views on Academic Focus between the two cultural groups than for Play Support as it related to children's play skills.

Despite our emergent evidence of cultural differences on the parent play beliefs factors, lack of associations between beliefs and parents' perceptions of their child's play skills for Latino families may tap into cultural differences in how parents view their child's play. Although there were no significant group differences between African-American and Latino parents on the three play skills outcomes, there were differences between the groups in how they saw the play skills as related to one another. Examining the inter-factor correlations suggests that African-American parents make clear distinctions between interactive and disruptive play, and that a child showing interactive play looks very different from a child that is displaying disruptive play behaviours. This distinction was not made among the Latino families, who instead saw strong similarities in disruptive and disconnected play behaviours. Nonetheless, for both groups of parents, academic readiness beliefs were positively related to child age, indicating that the older the child was the more likely the parent was to endorse readiness beliefs. This finding makes sense developmentally, and may reflect parents' awareness that pending entry into kindergarten might signal a switch in parental expectations for children's learning. Latino parents also endorsed more Play Support beliefs when their children were girls, whereas no relation with gender was found for African-American families.

Findings from this underpowered, exploratory secondary data analysis must be interpreted with caution. We acknowledge that the size of our African-American and Latino groups makes these findings susceptible to the challenges associated with small sample studies, such as having enough power to detect statistically meaningful effects and vulnerability to outliers. Further, the generalizability of the findings is limited to mothers, who were the primary participants in the study. This area of inquiry can be enhanced by additional study of these and other cultural groups using larger samples. In addition, our study was not able to model the effects of parents' education, given the large number of parents who were not educated within the USA. Measuring family-level covariates, such as parents' own educational experiences, in a way that is meaningful across cultural groups would be beneficial for better understanding influences on family processes. Nonetheless, we believe that this study sheds light on the need for understanding play itself, play opportunities, and adults as facilitators of play experiences within a cultural context.

Conclusions

This study advances our understanding about parent play beliefs by raising important questions about how different cultural groups think about children's play – both in terms of its importance and in their perceptions of their own child's play behaviours. This exploration can help us broaden our understanding of how children's play opportunities and skills may be situated within culturally constrained parental influences. Such information is needed to maximize parents' own contributions, as well as those by family engagement initiatives and ECE settings, in efforts to use play strategies to promote children's growth and development. Strengths of this study include targeting low-income parents from two cultural groups with the goal of uncovering heterogeneity in parents' play beliefs. This is important for three reasons: (1) low-income

families are often portrayed from a deficit perspective suggesting less parent engagement in their children's education; (2) low-income families are at heterogeneous group, with much of this heterogeneity stemming from cultural factors including country of origin, ethnicity, and languages spoken; and (3) ECE programmes targeting low-income children, such as Head Start in the USA, serve a broad range of culturally diverse children and families. Other strengths were using empirically derived tools, the PIPPS – Parent Version (Fantuzzo, Mendez, et al., 1998) and the PPBS (Fogle & Mendez, 2006) that were developed with samples of low-income African-American families participating in Head Start; thus, we are at the beginning stages of understanding how these constructs are best measured with culturally diverse families.

Further, this study contributes to needed research illustrating normative development and family life among low-income families who are from diverse cultural groups, especially African-American and immigrant Latino families. As we begin to understand how parents develop beliefs about play and how they view their own child's play skills, it is important to consider how culture play may a role in shaping parents' perspectives on a range of play-related topics including how they feel about early childhood care and education settings valuing play-based learning. This intersection between culturally influenced perspectives on play has important implications for understanding the degree of continuity between children's experiences and home and at school. Among the theories used to describe racial and ethnic gaps in achievement among older children, the cultural capital mismatch theory (e.g. Swidler, 1986) may be relevant for considering issues of continuity of experiences with respect to play. Children who have fewer opportunities to engage in play before entering ECE settings may have less experience to draw from as they learn to negotiate interactions with peers during play (e.g. sharing, taking turns, considering peers' preferences) and how to meet classroom expectations for play in school-based settings (e.g. degree of rough-and-tumble play, voice volume, cleaning up and caring for play items). As suggested by Barbarin, Downer, Odom, and Head (2010), the experience of discontinuities between home and school is likely to begin when children enter early childhood settings, which may have implications for children's trajectories as they advance to the early elementary grades.

Further, some parents themselves may experience a 'mismatch' between their own expectations for what strategies are most effective for promoting their child's learning and development, and the strategies being used in ECE settings that employ play-based learning approaches. Parents who do not endorse play as a learning vehicle for young children may be concerned about how ECE settings are preparing their child to be successful upon transitioning to more 'formal' educational experiences with higher expectations for academic competence as children get older. In addition, parents who may see school readiness as important, but within the domain of educators and not parents, may be less likely to conceptualize play as a learning context for children and one in which adults can play an important role. In LaForett and Mendez's (2016) sample of African-American parents, those who endorsed play as developmentally important (Play Support) also felt more efficacious in contributing to their child's education; the reverse pattern was found when parents endorsed academic readiness beliefs (Academic Focus). Other research has previously documented that parents who feel efficacious in their ability to

contribute to their child's education reported engaging in more learning activities with their child at home (Downer & Mendez, 2005; Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007).

To the extent that parents' beliefs and other perspectives about play are influenced by culture, this has bearing for how parents receive and ultimately respond to parent-focused efforts that incorporate parents' use of play-based interactions with their child. Indeed, low-income families are often the target of large-scale early intervention and school readiness programmes, such as Head Start and some state-level pre-kindergarten programmes, as well as family engagement initiatives (e.g. Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework; Administration for Children and Families, 2011) or other family-focused interventions (Nurse Family Partnership; Olds, Kitzman, Cole, & Robinson, 1997; Parents as Teachers; see Castro, Mendez, Garcia, & Westerberg, 2012) that may or may not be linked to families' participation in ECE programmes. Indeed, parents' use of play-based learning approaches with their child is a key component of parent engagement activities, particularly for preschool-aged children, according to the National Center for Children in Poverty (Smith, Robbins, Stagman, & Mahur, 2013). In summary, ECE programmes, family engagement initiatives, and family-focused interventions would benefit from considering how parents' cultural experiences may shape their perspectives on play. Efforts to intentionally explore how to explicitly honour and incorporate parents' beliefs and cultural values in the development and delivery of such programmes may prove useful for developing strategies on how to talk about play in early childhood with culturally diverse parents of young children.

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Notes on contributors

Doré LaForett is an Advanced Research Scientist at UNC, Chapel Hill whose research on young children's school readiness and mental health spans the promotion, prevention, and treatment continuum. She is also interested in how family context shapes children's development and mental health. Dr. LaForett's work has focused on low-income and ethnic/language minority populations, and she has been involved in several research projects and initiatives focused on young dual language learners and their families. Her research activities are informed by her experiences providing clinical services to children and families targeting externalizing and internalizing behaviours and developmental disabilities across school, community, and health-care settings.

Julia Mendez is an Associate Professor at UNC, Greensboro, who has research and teaching interests related to the impact of poverty on the development of young children, parent involvement in children's education, risk and resilience, and clinical interventions for ethnic minority children and families. She is presently an investigator with the National Research Center on Hispanic Children and Families, examining factors that contribute to access and utilization of early care and education by Latino children and families.

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