

EUROPEAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION RESEARCH ASSOCIATION
(EECERA)

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP (SIG)

“RETHINKING PLAY”

POSITION PAPER¹ ABOUT

THE ROLE OF PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

1. Introduction

Today there is a trend across Europe towards the application of measured and standardized learning outcomes for children in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Within this context related to neo-liberal views of education, the value attributed to children’s play by policy makers in early schooling is linked to concrete (cognitive) learning outcomes rather than a holistic perspective of children’s development, leading to an instrumentalisation and regulation of play and a “schoolification” of ECEC (Hännikäinen, Singer & van Oers 2013: 165; Moss 2007). This trend towards standardization for comparison of achievements across countries is also often paralleled by performance or quality evaluation systems being applied to ECEC teachers and early childhood education settings further restricting creativity to fit in externally benchmarked ‘high quality’ provision. Although we may praise this striving for high quality there are several criticisms we may make about these trends towards a new instrumentalist construction of education and learning and its impact on play. These trends demonstrate a clear change of discourse: from children’s well-being, creativity and diverse meaningful social actions and interactions to a focus on standardized efficiency, rationalization and quest for defined and prescribed excellence in ECEC. As a result, play is restricted and/or redirected. In contrast to the measurable predetermined outcomes, play is very often defined as a process performed by children, not adults, as an ‘intrinsically motivated, with no externally fixed outcome’ activity (Burghardt 2010) and one that leads “who knows where” (Hughes 2010).

2. Play as a fundamental aspect of children’s development

Many authors argue that it is essential to protect children’s play, primarily as a process in which children can explore new cultural settings and make their own choices and decisions (Sandberg & Eriksson, 2008). Davey and Lundy (2011) argue

¹ This is an ongoing and open position paper of the SIG and we invite researchers and academics from all over the world to contribute drawing from their studies in different countries and thus enriching the perspectives included in the paper.

that a rights based approach to children's play emphasises issues such as freedom, choice, participation and inclusion. These issues are an important and necessary part of children's play. The intrinsic value of play as evolutionary for children, and the significance of protecting adult free play spaces is advocated (Hughes 2001; Hughes 2010). The therapeutic value of play (Axline 2011; Klein 1932) may be especially significant taking into consideration issues that are out of children's control such as immigration and war which lead to an increase of children at risk but also children's busy schedules which marginalise children's play.

3. The importance of distinguishing between different terms: Play; playful learning; and learning through play

Play is a broad concept that can be viewed from a range of theoretical strands and can therefore be observed and interpreted in many different ways. Ailwood (2003: 288) describes play as 'an elusive concept that refuses to be pinned down'. The 'play' discourse that most closely aligns with individual values and beliefs is likely to determine the professional practice decisions made as well as the subsequent play opportunities children engage in. In any case, play is recognised as a social activity in a specific socio-cultural context, either initiated by children or/and adults. Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) suggest that "there are play dimensions in learning and learning dimensions in play" (p.637). Practitioners need to frame their practice taking into consideration the play and learning elements that ensure that children actively participate in constructing their play world based on their own interests and needs. Thus, adults need to both value the perspective of the child and acknowledge the meaning of play for children to be able to form part of the child's play world and establish meaningful relationships with them and at the same time acknowledge the potential of play for development and facilitate or support children's play. In this way, play and learning in context are strongly related. It is important to note that playful learning or use of play *for* learning may be slightly different to play initiated and controlled by children as players and perhaps fits with a constructivist approach to development and education. Thus, playful learning may be an extrinsically facilitated activity that is planned to enhance opportunities for personal choice and intrinsic direction within a boundary of classroom or other structured space. Based on the above, both student teachers and teachers should "learn to use play as the source, context and medium for a child's learning and development." (Hakkarainen, Brédikyte, Jakkula & Munter 2013: 224).

4. Acknowledging the adults' role in play

There are many perspectives on what children's play may look like, its content and purpose and the adult's role within children's play: from child-led play without an adult involvement through adult-directed play to play co-constructed by children and an adult (Andrews, 2012).

If a particular position is taken about the role of the adult in children's play it affects what happens in play and children's experiences. Current educational approaches provide an alternative example of how learning can be fostered based on play pedagogies rather than teacher directed pedagogies (Wood, 2004, 2010). At the same

time, it is important to acknowledge that not all children participate in self-directed play successfully and some need support to achieve this. It is crucial to consider teacher education and how teachers are prepared to support a play pedagogy. van Oers (2013) stresses the value of a play-based curriculum and the crucial role of the adult. Hakkarainen et. al. (2013) highlight the value of adult and child engaging in shared 'play worlds'. In both approaches children are active and able to take initiative, with the teachers making use of the positive affect, engagement and 'momentums of learning' to strengthen or enrich children's experiences in their play.

5. The significance of a play environment

It is not just in organized and educational settings that children play. Spaces such as home environments, community play parks and streets also provide rich and diverse play opportunities. Supporting children's play requires careful consideration of the setting, children's individual needs, the established relationships and those that emerge and develop through play. A facilitated play environment should support children's exploration and curiosity allowing potential for exploration and experimentation of interests, ideas, materials, emotions and social relationships. Play is also political. Huizinga (1955) and later Corsaro (1997) drawing on the sociology of childhood (see also James, Jenks & Prout, 1998) consider how play constructed by children within their peer and school culture 'overturns' current culture and creates new cultural understandings. Lefebvre (1991) reminds us that we should consider how we offer children 'conceived spaces' to meet adult-defined or structural needs, but that children will wish to 'own' spaces creating them as their 'lived places'. We may therefore need to consider how we offer environments that best facilitate children's intrinsic direction and the power relationships that ensure the enactment of children's initiatives and interests.

Our position

We recognize that there is an instrumentalist movement in education and a consequent devaluation of play. Both the context and the process of children's construction of their own worlds (and at the same time of their contribution to the societal world they live in) is challenged by a standardized structure of education which may move play away from the personal meaning it has for children and its spontaneous and creative character, to set outcomes measuring only aspects of knowledge and skills. This shift has important consequences when defining the notion of play itself, the aims of ECEC and how these aims relate to a participatory, democratic and inclusive paradigm. We uphold the role of children as active participants in deciding the content and process of ECEC and the role of ECEC teachers as supporters of children's thoughts and actions.

We call for the ECEC community's attention to this issue of declining opportunity for play and support a critical discussion and presentation of alternative perspectives to

the standardization and rationalization of education. We challenge the approach which highly emphasizes outcomes that adults perceive as important for children and that children have to reproduce for measurement in order for ECEC to be considered effective. Play is a meaningful activity for children and one of their basic rights. Yet the outcomes are diverse. They are noticeable, but not always measurable. Learning occurs during play in multiple ways and children could gain a lot from supportive adults allowing them the space, time and interaction to develop their play activities. Play is also valuable on its own right as a meaningful socio-cultural activity and not just because of its relation to learning. We propose that the pre-service education and the professional development of in-service ECEC teachers is crucial in preparing and supporting them in their role as researchers and reflective practitioners. Such programs should educate ECEC teachers theoretically and practically to realize the importance of play for young children, recognize the meaning and potential of play in children's lives and to reflexively adapt the educational program to children's special and varying wishes and interests. Moreover, teachers need to advocate for children's play and educate parents and other adults' in children's lives about the essential impact of play and how they can best participate in it.

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