

**Sociocultural Approaches to Free Play in Kindergarten:**

**Understanding Play through Children and Understanding Children through Play**

Carla Montie

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UBC Faculty of Education

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Instructor: Iris Berger

## **Introduction**

I have always been passionate about play, in both my personal life and my professional life. My early childhood experiences of play were formative and memories of play will always have a fond place in my heart and mind. Throughout my life, the importance of play has continued in many different forms, including playing and coaching sports and engaging in play-based hobbies such as hiking, skiing, canoeing, archery, mountain biking and agility training with my dogs. Now as a teacher, I ask myself, what kind of experiences and memories of play do I want to share with my students?

Many educators, parents, academic researchers and advocates for children's rights agree that play is vital for young children. However, how do we know what constitutes play? Although play is considered to be a universal or desirable phenomenon of childhood, there are variations in meaning, form, and context. The concept of play is socially constructed and varies based on cultural norms, values, and beliefs. In addition, ideas and actions of play are formed by a variety of dynamic social, cultural, and political elements that are interconnected and constantly changing. Children are co-constructors of culture as they engage with people, places, objects, and ideas. In play cultures, children are players and participants; they are creators and collaborators. Children use play to express ideas, identities, interests and inquiries. Children also use play to explore cultural context and make sense of the world around them. Therefore, children can provide valuable insight into the world of play; and conversely, play can provide insight into the lives of children.

While learning about sociocultural theories of early childhood education this term, I realized that I would like to explore social and cultural constructions, components, and implications of free play, in the classroom. Some guiding questions, include: (1) What does free play mean from a sociocultural perspective? (2) How are ideas and actions of free play constructed by children, educators, social structures, greater cultural contexts and political climates? (3) What can children tell

us about free play? (4) What can free play tell us about children? (5) How can educators use free play to support the diverse contexts, interests, inquiries, and needs of children, in a classroom context? This paper will explore sociocultural approaches to understanding free-play, in a Kindergarten classroom context. The organization of this paper will consist of: (Part 1) Literature Review; (Part 2) Professional Implications; and (Part 3) References.

### **Review of the Literature**

In a review of the literature, I will use sociocultural perspectives to explore social and cultural aspects of free play, in a Kindergarten context. I have organized the literature review into the following four themes: (1) definitions of free play; (2) social and cultural complexities and diversities of free play; (3) children's interests and inquires, working theories, and funds of knowledge in free play; and (4) social and cultural equity: power relations and dynamics of free play.

### **Definitions of Free Play**

Research regarding definitions of play has been a popular topic of discussion and debate for years. Collecting information concerning meanings and actions of free play not only contributes to research on the topic, but also guides educational practices and policies. Continuing to develop understandings of free play is an important step in establishing foundations of knowledge to build pedagogies on. This process can enrich educator's views of free play in order to enhance pedagogies that integrate, inspire, and support free play in the classroom.

A study by Pyle and Danniels (2017) provided some definitions of free play. This study explored play in 15 public Kindergarten classrooms, in three school districts, in Ontario, Canada. According to Pyle and Danniels (2017), the term free play is usually used to describe play that is child-centered, voluntary, spontaneous, flexible, and often involves pretend play or many other types of play.

The authors explained that free play is the most child-directed form of play because the locus of control is with the child. Free play is child-initiated, and is related to interests or inquiries of the individual child or group of children (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). This study used qualitative methods to collect data, including observations and teacher interviews. While the information presented in this study provides a starting point to defining free play, it does not take into account complexities and diversities of free play. One challenge to this study is that children's perspectives were not included in the research. Furthermore, this study offers a working definition of free play in the context of Ontario, Canada. As a result, this data represents a simple and homogenous view of free play, based in a Western cultural setting. However, this study does not investigate free play in other cultural contexts. More research is needed to investigate children's perspectives of free play and to explore alternate definitions of free play in different cultural contexts.

In another study by Pyle and Alaca (2018), research was conducted from Kindergarten children's perspectives on play and learning. Research about play has been predominantly conceptualized from adult perspectives. As a result, little is known about children's views of their play experiences. This lack of children's perspectives has been an area of concern for researchers, parents, educators, and policy makes. "Considering that children are key agents in classroom play contexts, it is important to understand their views on play and learning" (Pyle & Alaca, 2018, p. 1063). By conducting research with children as participants, this study offered a much-needed approach to research about play. The goal of this study was to explore children's perspectives on the connectedness of play and learning and how these views are related to types of play that exist in their classroom setting. Ten Kindergarten classes were selected, in Ontario, Canada. Photo elicitation interviews were conducted with 134 Kindergarten students, and 10 hours of observation occurred in each classroom. Researchers found that in the 10 classrooms, free play was the most common form of play observed. Free play included a variety of activities such as building, toy bins, sensory play, painting, and house

center. Results indicated that children's understandings of connections between play and learning were related to teacher presence in play; communication of the purposes, values and roles of play; and the types of play environments set up in the classroom. "In classrooms where opportunities to engage in varied types of play were provided, the students expressed the perspective that play and learning were connected. In classrooms where free play was the dominant form of play, the students expressed the perspective that play and learning were distinct construct" (Pyle & Alaca, 2018, p. 1071). Findings from this study revealed that children have dynamic understandings of play that are connected to classroom context. This study provided valuable insight into children's perspectives of play, learning, classroom environments, class community, and class culture. However, further research involving children's perspectives in different cultural contexts is required to continue to enhance understandings of the complexities and diversities of free play.

### **Social and Cultural Complexities and Diversities of Free Play**

Sociocultural perspectives call us to question our own personal contexts, as well as ideals rooted in dominant Western cultural traditions. It is essential for educators to be aware of social and cultural aspects in order to challenge taken-for-granted values, beliefs, and biases of free play. This awareness involves examining assumptions about free play that could be participating in expectations, untruths, or inequities in the classroom. Challenging homogenous or simplistic representations of free play honours and celebrates the diverse realities of the world's cultures and children. What does free play mean within my community, in other communities, across the county, around the world, in minority groups, and in First Nations communities? What does free play mean to different educators, children, families, communities and cultures? How can dominant views of free play be challenged?

Sociocultural approaches include exploring social constructions of free play, the social and cultural elements that are at work in the process of these constructions, and the diversities that exist in

various social constructions. Woodhead's social and cultural perspective (2006) emphasized three main themes: "(i) diversities in early childhood; (ii) development is a social and cultural process; (iii) early childhood is socially constructed" (p. 18). I have adapted these themes (Woodhead, 2006) to consider free play from a social and cultural perspective; including diversities in free play, free play is a social and cultural process, and free play is socially constructed. First, exploring diversities of free play allows for a broader, more authentic understanding of individual and collective forms, varieties, and norms that exist. "For early childhood experts rooted in Western cultural traditions and values...these descriptions are full of culture specific assumptions...[that] homogenize 'children,' making no allowance for individual differences...[or] any other aspects of diversity" (Woodhead, 2006, p. 17). Respecting diversities within and between societies contributes to understandings of what constitutes contextually appropriate, natural, or beneficial forms of free play. Secondly, free play is a common phenomenon that exists for many children, in many contexts, all over the world. However, a social and cultural perspective points out that it is a social and cultural process. Children "...learn to think, feel, communicate and act within social relationships in the context of particular cultural settings and practices..." (Woodhead, 2006, p. 22). Children act and react to free play within the context of their environment; influenced by people, social factors, and greater cultural and political contexts. Lastly, meanings and understandings of free play are socially constructed. These constructs are ambiguous formations that are constantly changing within a given time and place. Free play has been understood differently in different societies, parts of the world, and periods of history. Researching free play across different children, communities, cultures, time and space can contribute a variety of perspectives, and can lead to inclusive understandings and pedagogies of free play in classrooms.

Interpretivist research has also revealed detailed insights into the complexities and diversities of free play, based on sociocultural contexts. Wood (2016) examined culturally responsive ways of understanding play through interpretivist methods. Dominant discourses of natural or normalized

childhoods often view play as a means to promote ‘typical’ development, health, well-being, or educational pathways. “In contrast, interpretivist ontology and epistemologies offer scope for understanding variations within and across contexts, and cultural-historical influences on children’s play repertoires” (Wood, 2016, p. 5). Portraying a range of social constructions of free play including different children, families, communities, and cultures is a way to contribute diverse perspectives, provide understandings to different contexts, and contest dominant narratives of play. This includes recognizing a variety of free play types, such as outdoor play, risky play, rough and tumble play, dramatic play, and play topics that are deemed culturally inappropriate or taboo (for example, death, politics, religion, gender, race, etc.). “Such insights provoke a challenge to more idealized and sanitized views of children’s play where the exhortation to ‘play nicely’ is often invoked as a means of adults controlling approved forms of play” (Wood, 2016, p. 7). Furthermore, children act as knowledge users and knowledge makers as they act and create through free play. “The challenge for interpretivist research is to reveal the ‘small narratives’ of children’s play and to appreciate their wider significance, not just for developmental or educational progress, but for understanding play for its own sake and in its own right, and for understanding how children invent and perform their own childhoods” (Wood, 2016, p. 5). One caution of engaging in interpretivist research is that it involves an ongoing process of ethical reflexivity. This process must involve cultural relativism by considering cultural context and relevant values about children, childhoods and play. More interpretivist research is needed, in different cultural settings, in order to contribute diverse and detailed understandings of free play.

### **Children’s Interests, Inquiries, Working Theories, and Funds of knowledge**

Educators have the challenge of finding meaningful ways to support play, learning, and growth among diverse groups of children. A funds of knowledge approach to education explains that teachers should draw upon their own and others’ interests, inquiries, working theories, and funds of knowledge

to enhance pedagogies in the classroom. Free play can be a relevant and powerful way to provide children with opportunities to access these elements in a fun, engaging, and motivating context.

Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan (2011) define the term children's interests as "...children's spontaneous, self-motivated play, discussions, inquiry, and/or investigations that derive from their social and cultural experiences" (p. 187). This study explored the nature of children's interests in relation to children's experiences and funds of knowledge. It also examined how teachers work to construct curriculum by realizing and engaging with children's interests and inquiries. This study took place in two early-childhood settings, in New Zealand, and used interpretivist methodology and qualitative approaches in order to generate data. The findings from this study indicated that interests and inquiries are inspired by children's funds of knowledge, which are formed during participation in everyday life experiences. As a result, educators need to move beyond basic notions of the "...well-resourced, child-centered, play-based environment to interpret and respond to children's interests" (Hedges, Cullen, & Jordan, 2011, p. 186). Furthermore, educators need to engage more actively and authentically with children, families, and communities in order to gain deeper understandings of interests. This approach can be used to support children's interests and inquiries by providing elements in the play environment that help access, extend, and challenge children's funds of knowledge. Using a funds of knowledge approach, can provide educators with a way to recognize and respond to children's ideas, interests, and inquiries in order to support play-based pedagogies in the classroom.

Classroom environments are potentially rich meeting places for children, families, and teachers from diverse backgrounds to connect, play, learn, share, and interact. Free play in the classroom can be a method for educators to recognize and respond to the interests, inquiries, and funds of knowledge of children. How do children's interests emerge from the everyday realities of homes, classrooms, and communities? Chesworth (2016) pointed out that interpretations of children's interests often focus on

individual choice in engagement with materials and activities in play environments. However, sociocultural perspectives view interests as a collaborative process. Interests are co-constructed when community members participate in collective social and cultural practices. This paper reported on selected data from a larger study (Chesworth, 2015), which focused on the play of five key children and their peers, in a reception class, in England. Chesworth (2015) aimed to understand play through perspectives of children, their parents and teachers. This study (Chesworth, 2015) used a version of video-cued ethnography, by filming play episodes of free play and then using the filmed material as provocation for children, parents, and teachers to share their perspectives. Chesworth (2016) argued that "...participation in sociocultural activity generates interests informed by funds of knowledge that children reconstruct in their play" (p. 294). Chesworth (2016) explained that a critical understanding of how children's diverse experiences inform individual and collective interests can provide valuable interpretations of play. This report was small-scale and culturally specific in nature, however it provided valuable insights into the views of children. More research conducted in this way would be valuable to explore children's perspectives in a variety of diverse cultural settings.

Sociocultural approaches can combine concepts of interests and inquiries, funds of knowledge, and working theories to provide complex and diverse theories of free play. Children's funds of knowledge, interests and inquiries develop into working theories that are the drivers of play and learning, as children make sense of the world around them. These working theories are constantly changing as children work individually and collectively to construct and reconstruct meaning. Hill and Wood (2019) was an ethnographic case study that explored how children build and use working theories in play. Research was conducted with a Kindergarten class of 20 children, in an international school, in Switzerland. This study used video recordings of play episodes and post-video discussions with children and parents. Findings demonstrated that children's interests and working theories are sources of peer-led learning in the form of play. The authors explained that educators need to

understand and utilize children's interests, inquiries, and working theories to support meaningful, powerful, and relevant play. "The relationship between experiences and interests in fluid and dynamic as new experiences drive new interests, and vice versa" (Hill & Wood, 2019, p. 9). More research conducted in this way is needed to highlight children's perspectives and explore diverse cultures.

### **Social and Cultural Equity: Power Relations and Dynamics of Free Play**

It is widely accepted that curriculum planning should incorporate children's interests to inspire motivating and engaging learning opportunities. Furthermore, play-based learning environments support children's overall development, health, and well-being. I used to view free play in the classroom as an open, unbiased, equal access opportunity, providing play and learning experiences for all children. However, sociocultural approaches view free play in the context of culture, including the social structures, dynamics, and power relations that exist within it. Therefore, does free choice and free play, in the classroom, really provide freedom, equity, and equal access to all children? A wide variety of factors affects free choice and free play. Gender, ethnicity, language, social class, ability or disability; as well as exposure to educational, social or play settings influence children's participation in free play. As a result, free choice and free play may not be as fair and free as expected.

Wood (2014) used sociocultural and post-structural theories to challenge discourses of free choice and free play in early childhood education. This is an important process because taken-for-granted assumptions about play influence practice, policy, and power on many levels. This study by Wood (2014) involved ten children in an Early Years Foundation Stage setting, in England, and used naturalistic, interpretivist methods. Research investigated children's individual and group choices during free choice and free playtime, in order to reveal how the social dynamics of power operate within different contexts. "Group play is a complex orchestration of social, physical, cognitive, cultural, temporal and relational processes" (Wood, 2014, p. 14). These complex processes encompass

more than children's motivation to play or developmental needs; play can act as an expression of individual identities and interests, peer cultures and interests, social and cultural elements, and "...a testing ground for whose freedom, power and control can be exercised" (Wood, 2014, p. 16). In the classroom, power relationships exist between children, between children and adults, and between participants and social rules. Furthermore, in educational settings, free choice and free play are controlled by peers, teachers, classroom environment and materials, policies, culture norms, and political structures. Teachers typically define what choices are available, what freedoms are allowed, what rules and boundaries are in place during free play, free choice, and general classroom behaviour. What types of play are valued, accepted, and encouraged? What types of play are forbidden, restricted, or controlled? What needs, choices, and interests are exercised or marginalized through free play? As a result, it is extremely important to acknowledge the complexity of children's experiences and the power relations that exist in children's play. Wood (2014) called for educators "...to be aware of the children's repertoires of choice, specifically the ways in which the freedom to choose may advantage some, but disadvantage others" (Wood, 2014, p. 16). By raising questions and becoming aware of the social, cultural, and political dimensions and power dynamics of play cultures, we can work towards supporting equity for all children, in play endeavours.

### **Professional Implications**

While learning about sociocultural theories this term, I became inspired to understand how free play can be a window into the lives of children; and how children's perspectives can be a view into the world of free play. I now understand the importance of observing children in free play and listening to children's perspectives to guide play pedagogies in the classroom. I now also understand the importance of exploring how free play opportunities, experiences and environments can be used to support and include all children and their unique contexts. "Early learning environments are enrolling

more students with diverse learning needs...educators want to support diverse communities of learners...Play is a powerful tool for educators who support diverse learners as it capitalizes on child interest and peer engagement” (The Play Today B.C. Handbook, 2019, p. 35).

Today educators are living and teaching in diverse communities that include children and families from a wide variety of cultures. Sociocultural approaches focus on building nurturing, responsive, and inclusive climates that promote the holistic and healthy well-being of all children. These approaches recognize that each child brings a unique context, containing social and cultural components, as well as strengths and needs. “Each child has histories, contexts, gifts, capabilities, and potential that can be honoured and nurtured with responsive and productive practices and environments” (B.C. Early Learning Framework, 2019, p. 25). Early childhood educators have an important role to support all children to explore identity, interact socially, establish relationships, and feel a sense of belonging within the class community. “Regardless of socio-economic status, geographic isolation, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, abilities and learning needs, and family structure and values, every child should be welcomed and empowered to pursue their gifts” (B.C. Early Learning Framework, 2019, p. 25). Free play can be a powerful, motivating, and meaningful way for children to engage and explore; and to construct and reconstruct culture.

Canada’s National Accord on Early Learning and Early Childhood Education (Franklin, McNinch & Sherman, 2013) provided twelve key principles to guide practice in early learning environments. I will use these principles to consider how I can use free play to support all children and families in my Kindergarten classroom:

(1) “Early learning education focuses on the whole child” (p. 6). Therefore, free play can provide opportunities for children to express their holistic contexts by drawing upon personal, social, cultural, and linguistic components.

(2) “Children are capable and ready to learn, and should be viewed as full of potential” (p. 6).

Free play can celebrate the fact that children are competent and capable by allowing them to have freedom, make choices, make mistakes, learn, create and collaborate through play.

(3) “Adults are ethically responsible for ensuring the health and well-being of children” (p. 6).

Primarily, it is the educator’s duty to facilitate physical and emotional safety during free play. As a result, educators must be aware of subtle aspects of power inequities, relations, and dynamics in order to support social and cultural equity among children and between children and adults.

(4) “Families and community are valued and respected” (p. 6). Children’s unique contexts include connections to family, community and culture. These aspects need to be valued, respected, and represented in class culture and in free play.

(5) “Curricula are responsive to children and families” (p. 7). To facilitate equity and equal access to free play, educators must ensure the class environment includes children’s and families’ interests, inquires, working theories, funds of knowledge, and linguistic and cultural aspects.

(6) “Supportive relationships and interactions between teachers and children are valued and nurtured” (p. 7). Free play provides children with opportunities to develop social skills. It is the educator’s role to support positive interactions and relationships in free play. As a result, teachers may need to guide students, scaffold social skills, and support free play when help is required.

(7) “Early learning educators and environments provide meaningful and relevant opportunities for young children to interact with one another” p.7). Free play content and environments must be set up to invite children to connect and interact with peers in real and authentic ways.

(8) “Early learning educators, appropriate environments, and community resources engage the minds of young children” (p. 7). Free play practices, resources, and environments should provide children with learning opportunities to explore and investigate through play.

(9) “Early learning takes into account a wide range of philosophical, pedagogical, and theoretical approaches that inform policy and practice” (p. 7). Educators should aim for holistic, balanced, and eclectic approaches to free play pedagogies.

(10) “Early learning educators engage in care-full documentation of student learning and their own teaching” (p. 7). The learning processes, assessments, and documentations of free play must include practices that celebrate multiple languages and cultural identities.

(11) “Diversity and social responsibility are valued” (p. 7). Free play in the classroom values inclusion, equity and democratic practices that offer children opportunities for voice and choice; interdependence and dependence; co-operation and collaboration.

(12) “Policy and practice in early learning are informed by current educational research, knowledge, and appreciation of this field as critical components of public education” (p. 8). Educators must stay up to date on research in order to provide evidence-based pedagogies of free play.

Over the past 20 years of teaching experience, my play pedagogies are constantly changing to reflect my own beliefs and values; as well as the interests, inquiries and needs of my students. As The B.C. Early Learning Framework states, I teach with “...the hope of inspiring and supporting the creation of rich, joyful early childhood spaces where children, adults, ideas, and materials come together, and where knowledge is constructed about learning and living in ways that are local, inclusive, ethical, and democratic (2019, p. 11). I feel honoured to be teaching in a time that offers many rich theories to draw upon. I look forward to what new theories will have to offer in the future.

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