

**Reimagining Conditions of Possibility through Play**

**Disrupting Play Pedagogies in ECE**

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## **Introduction**

Over the years, I have been passionate about play, both in my personal and in my school life. As a teacher, coach and community member, I have been committed to encouraging play opportunities that support children's learning, development, health, and well-being. However, while learning about topics related to leadership, practice and policy this term, I became inspired to problematize pedagogies of play. My overall goal is explore how play pedagogies can extend, rather than limit, "conditions of possibility" (Foucault, 1978; 2000 as cited in Ailwood, 2011). Engaging in this process will include disrupting dominant discourses of play by challenging Western views, assumptions, and taken-for-granted beliefs. This process will also involve resisting my own personal "habits of thoughtlessness" (Hannah Arendt, 1963; 1977 as cited in Berger, 2015) by reflecting on my routine ways of thinking, acting, and responding through play. My guiding question is: How can play pedagogies be reimagined and reconstructed in my Kindergarten classroom to allow for more open and inclusive; rich and responsive conditions of possibility? The organization of this paper will consist of: (Part 1) Literature Review; (Part 2) Professional Implications; (Part 3) Conclusion; (Part 4) References and Bibliography.

## **Review of the Literature**

In a review of the literature, I will problematize play pedagogies in Western early childhood educational (ECE) contexts. The structure of this section was inspired with a quote from my Module 9 group discussion: "Resistance movements discuss ideas, including diverse and complex narratives; social movements celebrate and enact the values of this complexity and diversity; and transformative change is the continual process of challenging and reforming systems" (Montie, 2020). The literature review is organized into three themes: (1) Resistance Movements: Venturing Beyond the Known - Reimagining Pedagogies of Play; (2) Social Movements: Exploring Other

Possibilities – Deconstructing Roles, Relationships, and Power Dynamics of Play; and (3) Transformative Change: Embracing the Unexpected - Reconstructing Notions of Innovation, Collaboration, and Leadership through Play.

### **Resistance Movements: Venturing Beyond the Known**

#### **Reimagining Pedagogies of Play**

*“To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy”  
(Foucault, 2000, p. 456)*

In a Western context, play has a long-standing history of being considered an integral component of ECE pedagogy, curriculum, and policy. Dominant discourse on the topic of play in ECE offers little variation regarding definitions, forms, purposes, and benefits. Within research and many ECE settings, there seems to be an agreement that play has the potential to act as a child’s vehicle for learning, growth and development (Pyle and Danniels, 2017). Play-based pedagogies are commonly promoted by policy documents as a way to provide children with access to learning opportunities in engaging and motivating contexts (For example, British Columbia Early Learning Framework, 2019; The Play Today B.C. Handbook, 2019). Furthermore, play is viewed as an appropriate forum for children to demonstrate knowledge and skills. While Western beliefs typically reiterate the value and positive nature of play, recent concerns about the purpose of early education have inspired investigations into the pedagogy of play. Some questions inquire: How has play come to be so prevalent in ECE? How are dominant discourses guiding the way that play is being used in ECE settings? How are dominant discourses of play directing how children and adults interact with each other? How can we make space in play pedagogies for conditions of possibility that allow for innovation, collaboration, leadership and change? Over the past 2 years, I have read numerous articles on the topic of play. It has been an interesting and enlightening experience as I

continue to enact and evolve my understanding. In this section, my goal is to venture beyond the known to reimagine pedagogies of play.

Ailwood (2003) stated that there are three dominant discourses of play that are commonly discussed in Western early childhood literature. One, romantic / nostalgic discourses of play believe that childhood is a time of purity and innocence; therefore, play is natural and children *need* play. This point of view focuses on ‘play as progress’ (physical, intellectual, emotional and social development) and always deems play as positive and productive. Two, play characteristics discourses believe that there are specific qualities that define play. Some typical attributes include themes of pleasure, control, freedom, active engagement, intrinsic motivation, nonliteral behaviour, and process oriented. Three, developmental discourses of play believe that child-initiated, child-directed, teacher-supported play is an essential component of developmentally appropriate practice. Ailwood suggests that these three perspectives are problematic, as they represent simplistic, homogenous, romanticized versions of realities; and leave little space to include diversity, complexity and possibility. Dominant discourses of play and pedagogy limit our ways of thinking, knowing, being, doing, and becoming in ECE, making it difficult to resist and reimagine beyond them. How can dominant views of play and pedagogy be challenged?

Rogers (2011) argued that the relationship between play and pedagogy are problematic for three main reasons. First, Western notions typically dichotomize play versus work by putting them in opposition. This binary view of play and pedagogy makes it difficult to integrate them as complementary approaches. Second, theories that describe play as the work of childhood / the child compromise the natural essence of play. This conceptualization places play as a technique of social control and a way to perpetuate assumptions about the nature of childhood. Third, increasing popularity of play pedagogies in many places around the world, have led to its use as an instrument

for learning future competencies. Views that the purpose of play is for children to become successful students, productive citizens, and achieve neo-liberal goals contradict other life-enhancing qualities of play. Rogers (2011) explained that tensions between competing ideas are a ‘conflict of interests’ that makes it difficult to realize potential benefits of play. How can play pedagogies move beyond opposing imperatives to open up more space for other possibilities?

Sociocultural perspectives call us to question ideals rooted in dominant Western traditions, including assumptions, taken-for-granted values, beliefs and biases deeply embedded in play pedagogies. Challenging homogenous, binary, simplistic, or linear representations of play honours the complexities and diversities of ECE realities and makes space for other possibilities. Wood (2016) used sociocultural approaches to provide rich and responsive ways of understanding play through interpretivist research methods. Dominant Western discourses of natural or normal childhoods often view play as a means to promote ‘typical’ development 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). Embracing open and inclusive notions of play contests the existence of singular, dominant, or oppressive narratives. It makes room for alternate narratives, diverse and complex understandings, and new / other pedagogical possibilities. What does play mean to children, families, teachers, community members, and partners in education? Furthermore, what do play pedagogies mean in local, global, minority, First Nations, and other post-colonial communities?

Many researchers have been calling for new pedagogies of play that recognize the diversities and complexities and make room for other possibilities. Docket’s (2011) article discussed data from a three-year project aiming at reforming pedagogy in the first year of school, in South Australia (*Early Years: Curriculum Continuity for Learning* project, 2007). Data from this project inspired

some recommendations for new pedagogies of play. I have adapted and added to Docket's list (2011, p, 44) to make my own list of ways to move beyond the known to reimagine play pedagogies, including:

- Resisting simplified and singular views of dominant discourse;
- Recognizing the complexities and diversities of play;
- Having awareness that play can have multiple definitions, forms, purposes, benefits;
- Including wide ranges of play possibilities to offer rich and responsive experiences;
- Reflecting on your own personal habits - ways of thinking, acting, responding through play;
- Honoring many perspectives of play – children, teachers, parents, researchers;
- Recognizing that not all play is positive or desirable;
- Understanding and critiquing of a range of theoretical approaches;
- Focusing on personal, social and cultural contexts enacted through play;
- Understanding and inviting First Nations Ways of Knowing, being, and doing through play;
- Implementing place-based, ecological and nature-based, play pedagogies;
- Focusing on roles, relationships, and interactions of children and adults;
- Being aware of the power dynamics (freedoms, control, resistance) that inevitably exist;
- Focusing on collaboration and co-construction of knowledge, actions, and leadership;
- Incorporating pedagogical narration / documentation to showcase connections between play, learning, and pedagogy;
- Exploring ways to connect play and pedagogy with colleagues, families, school, community;
- Engaging in / engaging others in opportunities to reflect on discourses of play and pedagogy;

- Understanding that play pedagogies are influenced by and also have the power to influence dimensions of practice, policy, and politics;
- Play can create certain kinds of possibilities to relate to the world and its human and nonhuman inhabitants.

By working to question (disrupt, resist) and deconstruct (dismantle, decolonize) the so-called ‘truths’ that have been monopolizing space in ECE; allows us to reconstruct (rejuvenate, restore) and open up space for other possibilities. This process involves an eclectic, dynamic, multi-faceted approach by making room for complex theories (critical, socio-cultural, post-colonial, post-structural, progressive) and diverse narratives (Global, minority, Post-Colonial, Indigenous Ways). How can we reimagine pedagogies of play to include diversities, complexities, and other / new possibilities? Are we brave enough to leave illusions of certainty to travel into the unknown?

### **Social Movements: Exploring Other Possibilities**

#### **Deconstructing Roles, Relationships, and Power Dynamics in Play Pedagogies**

*“It is important for pedagogy not to be the prisoner of too much certainty, but instead be aware of both the relativity of its powers and the difficulties of translating its ideas in to practice”  
(Malaguzzi in Edwards et al., 1998, p. 58)*

In Western cultures, it is widely accepted that play is a desirable, positive, and developmentally appropriate approach to early learning. These dominant discourses often describe play pedagogies as pathways to open, inclusive, unbiased learning opportunities for all students. Play-based experiences are promoted as being opportunities for children to exercise voice, choice, control, freedom, independence, and autonomy. However, as a variety of theoretical approaches (critical, sociocultural, post-colonial, post-structural, and others) point out that play must be understood within context, including elements of culture, gender, ethnicity, language, exposure, social class, ability or disability. This includes cultural beliefs, social structures, roles, relationships, and power dynamics that inevitably exist in play, in the classroom, and in other ECE settings.

These complex dimensions contribute to specific conditions of possibility – the practices that are / are not possible in the early years. Therefore, play may not always promote freedom, equity, and equal access to all children. How can I problematize these elements to support rich and responsive; equitable and ethical play pedagogies in my Kindergarten classroom? In this section, my goal is to explore other and new possibilities by deconstructing / reconstructing roles, relationships, and power dynamics through pedagogies of play.

Ailwood (2003) used Foucault's (2000) notions of governmentality to examine how dominant discourses of play govern the behaviour of children and adults in ECE settings. Foucault's governmentality refers to the 'conduct of conduct' – how we manage others and how others manage us. Ailwood (2003) discussed technologies of governmentality, which are strategies, tactics, ideas, and knowledges that shape and limit our conduct. Ailwood (2003) argued that play is a technology of governmentality, as it is a common tactic that guides the management of behaviour for children and adults in ECE settings. Understanding play in the context of language, knowledge, and discourse reveals frameworks of thinking that become produced, established, normalized, and constantly reproduced. Some examples in early childhood include socially constructed notions of 'developmentally appropriate practice' and 'school readiness'; or dichotomies of 'work' and 'play' and separation of childhood and adulthood. Ailwood explained that it is important to question dominant discourses of play that have deemed natural and essential for a normal early childhood and education. Investigating aspects of governmentality in play provides opportunities to re-evaluate ways of thinking, acting, and interacting so other / new conditions of possibility may develop.

Another article by Ailwood (2011), discussed data from a previous study (Ailwood, 2003), investigating how 16 Kindergarten children used play to organize and manage their relationships in

the school playground, in New South Wales, Australia. Children were active participants in the research process, as they took photos and engaged in interviews. Ailwood (2011) explained the idea of conditions of possibility: “How we, as adults, think about young children is both enabled and constrained by the discursive possibilities we make use of to develop and justify our practice. These discourses form the conditions of possibility for thinking about, and acting within, our world” (p. 19). Schools and classrooms are institutional settings that typically operate within long established (difficult or slow-to change) conditions of possibility that have been produced and reproduced over decades and sometimes centuries. Some of these structures have traditionally included bells, timetables, desks, line-ups, dress codes, specific language, various manners and etiquettes. In the classroom and in play pedagogies “...there are a range of conditions of possibility that children and adults can and cannot draw upon to ‘do’ school” (Ailwood, 2011, p. 20). Conditions of possibility are entangled with contexts, interactions, and relationships that enable and constrain dynamics of power, control, freedom, and resistance. How can play pedagogies create conditions of possibility that shift roles and power relations, for children and adults, in ECE?

In the classroom, power relations exist between children, between children and adults, and between participants and social structures. Play experiences are controlled by a variety of aspects, including peers, teachers, administration, materials, environment, pedagogies, policies, social and cultural norms, and political structures. In addition, most education systems work within a traditional ‘top-down’ structure, where the ‘top’ has more access to power and control. For example, policy makers have active roles in forming policy, curriculum, and educational frameworks. Within in each school, administration and other positions of leadership guide school goals, initiatives, and learning plans. Furthermore, within each classroom setting, the teacher defines what choices are available, what freedoms are allowed, what rules and boundaries are in

place during play and general classroom behaviour. Children "...operate in a world where all adults have greater access to political, social, and economic relations of power... and where the conditions of possibility for their daily lives are produced and managed by adults" (Ailwood, 2011, p. 22).

Some guiding questions for educators to reflect on include: What types of play are valued, accepted, and encouraged in your classroom or school? What types of play are forbidden, restricted, or controlled? What needs, choices, and interests are exercised or marginalized through play? How can play pedagogies be used to empower children's voice and choice by allowing them to exercise locus of control, freedom, independence, and leadership?

In Western ECE settings, free-play is one of the most commonly implemented forms of play in Kindergarten classrooms (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Pyle & Alaca, 2018). According to Pyle and Danniels (2017), the term free play is used to describe play that is child-directed, voluntary, spontaneous, flexible, and often involves pretend play or many other types of play. Dominant discourses support pedagogies of free-play because they are considered to be a child-centered and democratic approach to play. However, research indicates, that while many teachers say they value and utilize this form of play in their classroom, many express that they are unclear about the methodologies behind it (Pyle & Alaca, 2018). Wood (2014) used sociocultural and post-structural theories to challenge discourses of free-play in early childhood education. This study involved ten children in an Early Years Foundation Stage setting, in England, and used naturalistic, interpretivist methods. Children's individual and group choices were observed during free-choice playtime, to investigate how social dynamics of power and resistance operate and whose freedom, power and control can be exercised. 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" (p. 16). Becoming aware of the power dynamics of play, including the

contextual (personal, social, cultural, and political) dimensions, we can work towards supporting equity for all children to access freedom, resistance, power and control in free-play and other play endeavours.

Deconstructing and reconstructing play pedagogies towards more collaborative approaches empower children and adults by allowing them to negotiate roles and relationships through interactions of independence, freedom, control and resistance. “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). Rogers (2011) recommended that it is important for play to be relational and flexible to allow pedagogies to be co-constructed between children, adults, and environment. When children and adults share the locus of control and creativity in play, there is room for collaboration and negotiation, allowing roles and relationships to shift and change as needed. “Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning how to learn” (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 83). How can we use play pedagogies to negotiate roles, relationships and power dynamics for children and adults in ECE settings? Are we brave enough to escape prisons of certainty to create conditions for other / new possibilities?

### **Transformative Change: Embracing the Unexpected**

#### **Reconstructing Notions of Innovation, Collaboration and Leadership through Play**

*“Embrace challenges in life as opportunities for transformation”  
(Bernie S. Siegel, 2020)*

When ECE is ready to move beyond the known, explore new possibilities, and embrace the unexpected, opportunities for creativity, innovation, collaboration, leadership and change emerge. Berger (2015) presented a dimension of leadership enactment, related to pedagogical narration,

which she termed “thinking in moments of not knowing.” Berger (2015) used this concept to refer to the practice of how pedagogical narration invites thinking beyond conventions and generalizations towards more rich and responsive endeavours in ECE. In this paper, Berger connected this concept to Rinaldi’s “moments of freedom” (Rinaldi; 2006 as cited in Berger; 2015) that exist in the space between the expected and the unexpected. These two concepts spoke to me as they demonstrate the potential of embracing the unknown, the uncertain, and the unexpected “...to orient educators toward complexity and thinking that is triggered by encounters with unexpected pedagogical situations” (Berger, 2015, p. 130). Relating this concept of leadership enactment to play pedagogies, I wonder if pedagogical narration and documentation can help display *moments of freedom* and *thinking in moments of not knowing* that occur through the unexpected nature of play? Furthermore, can pedagogical documentation of play connect pedagogy to public spheres as a way to inspire meaningful discussion, innovation, collaboration, and leadership?

Over the past 10 years, notions of leadership in ECE settings have been shifting to include more collaborative approaches that work to empower the collective. Early childhood settings, including classrooms and other community spaces, are potentially rich public meeting places for children, families, teachers, and other community members to connect and collaborate. “Play in early childhood education forms a significant nodal point at which understandings and discourses of childhood, motherhood, education, family, psychology and citizenship coagulate and collide” (Ailwood, 2003, p. 286). Play pedagogies in the classroom, the school, and other community settings can allow space for children and adults to interact and engage in the childhood and educational community, as partners in innovation, collaboration, and leadership. Play pedagogies and public spaces offer opportunities for children, educators, families, and community members to respond to the unexpected nature of play. How can play and public spaces be used to connect and

empower children, families, community members and other educational partners? How can connecting play and public spaces allow for opportunities for innovation, collaboration, and leadership? In this section, my goal is to investigate how to embrace the unexpected by reconstructing notions of innovation, collaboration, and leadership through pedagogies of play.

Interestingly, research has observed children being less present at play in public spaces in city settings. This trend could be related to increasingly common fears that are related to perceived dangers of childhood and cities. Bourke (2014) suggested that this tendency could be a representation of binary public perspectives of protecting children who are considered vulnerable in public spaces; and avoiding undesirable playful behaviour that pose a threat to public spaces. Bourke (2014) examined children's experiences of play in public spaces in Dublin City, Ireland. Fifty-two children, aged 9 – 11 participated in a survey, and 20 children contributed through photography and interviews. Data collected in this study, indicates that children feel like their play behaviours are constrained during daily walks through public spaces. Bourke (2014) recommended the importance of reconsidering how play and playful activity can be supported in public realms. This means increasing opportunities for children to access and share public spaces where they can interact with other children, adults, the environment, and play. This also means allowing children to participate in the construction of public spaces. For example, including children in collaborative leadership roles in urban planning, design, or other class, school, neighbourhood, or community-based projects and initiatives. In my local community, Pemberton, B.C., some examples public places that could inspire collaboration and collective leadership include classrooms, gymnasiums, schools, community centers, libraries, outdoor communal areas, shared gardens, playing fields, playgrounds, forest trails, ski hills, nature centers, bike parks, skate parks, and water parks. How

can we empower children and families as innovators and leaders by integrating play and public spaces? Are we brave enough to embrace the unexpected and move towards transformative change?

### **Professional Implications**

As a Kindergarten teacher, I have the challenge of finding meaningful, equitable, and ethical ways to support learning, growth, health, and well-being among diverse groups of children. My understandings of topics including early childhood, play, pedagogy, innovation, collaboration, and leadership inform my ways of knowing, being, doing, and *becoming* in my classroom. Teaching over the past 20 years has been a remarkable journey, as these ideas are constantly changing, adapting, and evolving. While learning about leadership and policy this term, I became motivated to explore how to disrupt dominant discourses, resist personal habits and routines, and make space for other / new conditions of possibility. This course has inspired me to push myself to think and act beyond my comfort zone of the known to explore new possibilities and embrace the unexpected. As Giugni (2011) explained: “Becoming worldly with is a practice of ‘grappling with’, looking for and creating leakages; colouring outside the lines; pushing ourselves to be, think and do beyond what we consider knowable and comfortable” (p. 16). Engaging in this ongoing process of reflection and re-creation; challenge and change is the ‘work in progress’ of *becoming* a learning, a teacher, a leader.

Ironically, over 20 years ago as a new teacher, I struggled to find the lucrative *expected - moments of knowing* and *moments of control*, as the job often felt chaotic and confusing. While it has taken me the first 20 years of my teaching career to discover ‘what works’ – my thinking is shifting. I am now hopeful that I will spend the next 20 years, questioning, deconstructing, and reconstructing these assumptions, routines, and habits. Continuing to problematize play pedagogies will guide the ongoing process of working to enrich and enhance play practices that inspire

innovation, collaboration, and leadership in my classroom and in my community. Shifts in my thinking about innovation, collaboration, and leadership as a way to inspire action and change through play pedagogies have several professional implications, including:

- Working to integrate ECE (play, learning, pedagogy, policy) and public spaces. For example, classroom, school, neighbourhood, community, and First Nations settings;
- Inviting children, families, community members, and educational partners to connect and collaborate in the classroom, school, and community. For example, game days, cooking and baking events, family fun events, field trips, celebrations, class projects, school assemblies;
- Focusing on collaborative play processes that allow children and adults to co-construct pedagogy, work together on collective projects, become leaders, and inspire action / change;
- Integrating child-centered / family-centered / community-centered - identities, ideas, interests, and inquiries into play pedagogies;
- Supporting a diverse variety of play types in the classroom, the school and beyond to allow for rich and responsive experiences: sensory play, messy play, outdoor play, risky play, rough and tumble play, dramatic play, STEAM activities, cooking, gardening, other cultural contexts in play, First Nations ways of play and place-based play, play topics deemed as culturally inappropriate or taboo (death, politics, religion, gender, and race);
- Articulating and documenting play to engage in / engage others in conversation about discourses about play, pedagogy, leadership, community-based projects, initiatives, issues, etc. For example pedagogical documentation / narration, learning stories, celebrations of learning, student-led conferences, e-portfolios, website, blog, emails, and visual displays;
- Finding ways to empower children, families, colleagues, community members, and other educational members as collaborative partners, innovators, and leaders.

Just as views regarding the value play are commonly expressed in ECE, so are challenges, limitations, and pressures related to implementing play pedagogies. Docket (2011) used data from the *Early Years: Curriculum Continuity for Learning* project (2007), which took place in South Australia. This project interviewed 30 teachers and principals to explore perspectives, practices, provisions, and challenges related to implementing play in the classroom. Docket (2011) explained that teachers expressed a range of barriers to incorporating play-based pedagogies. Some of the challenges included issues or limitations related to attitudinal, contextual, societal, structural, functional, or systemic realms. One common barrier mentioned was school administration's ability to influence teacher autonomy. Some school leaders were supportive of play-based pedagogy, while others were not. A number of teachers explained that colleagues were another important aspect to providing them with support or resistance to play-based programs. In addition, some teachers reported feeling pressure from curriculum expectations and accountability (assessment, reporting). Interestingly, some teachers interpreted curriculum frameworks as being prescribed learning outcomes, while others viewed play as a means to achieving outcomes. Teachers also discussed feeling pressure from parental expectations to prepare their child for later school and life. Classroom organization was another issue, as some teachers explained that it takes a great investment of time, money, and effort to implement a play-based system. Classroom management was an issue for some teachers who felt like students did not possess the skills required for play endeavours. Furthermore, some teachers felt unclear about how to implement classroom structures, systems, and routines to maintain some order in play that can be messy, busy, loud, and chaotic. In today's marketized world, it is easy for adults to be consumed by products that come in neat and tidy formats with measurable results and outcomes. Working to co-construct play pedagogies, within the classroom, school, and community, as a collaborative process may be uncertain, uncomfortable, messy, and chaotic at times. Are we brave enough to let go of delusions of certainty

and control to begin exploring other / new possibilities; to start embracing the unexpected; to engage in continual journeys of action and change?

### **Conclusion**

The current conditions of the world have provided us with a unique set of circumstances related to issues including, COVID-19, the environment, racial discrimination, systemic marginalization, globalism, social medial, marketization of education (neo-liberalism, consumerism, capitalization), and political instability. However, the state of the world can be seen as a time for resistance and re-imagination, deconstruction and reconstruction, exploration of other and new possibilities, action and transformative change. “We live in a time of chaos, rich in potential for new possibilities. A new world is being born. We need new ideas, new ways of seeing, and new relationships to help us now” (Margaret Wheatley, n.d.). By choosing to be optimists and activists, this time can be seen as an opportunity for innovation, collaboration, and leadership. I look forward to using new ideas, insights, and understandings, that I have gained in this course, to connect and collaborate with children, families, colleagues, partners in education, community members, and beyond - to work together as leaders and future builders.

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