

**The Pushes and Pulls of Play:
Tensions within Play Pedagogy in ECED**

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Introduction

Since the new millennium, Early Childhood Education (ECED) has been moving towards prioritizing academic standards for young learners, and promoting the use of play-based pedagogies. These two perspectives are often seen as binary, opposing, or contradictory rather than complimentary strategies to be used in a dynamic, multi-faceted approach to education. The perception that these views exist in a dichotomous, rather than a harmonious state has resulted in several tensions within perspectives, practices, and policies in ECED. Some areas of contention include: Tensions between academic learning and play-based learning; tensions between teacher-directed instruction and child-directed (student centered) exploration; and, tensions concerning overall understanding of play and play-based learning (in terms of definitions, benefits, purposes, roles of the adult, etc.).

In Canada, and many other countries, educational policies and curricula have been changing to acknowledge research promoting the importance of play as a way to support learning using developmentally appropriate pedagogy (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). There are several new mandates for play-based learning in early childhood education settings. In British Columbia, some examples include: The Play Today B.C. Handbook (2019), The B.C. Early Learning Framework (2019), The First Peoples Principles of Learning (2019), and the B.C. Curriculum and Core Competencies (2019). It is the professional responsibility of early childhood educators to review mandates and policies in order to inform their pedagogy. This process can help develop common culture, language, guidelines, expectations, and goals regarding the ways that play can be used in developmentally and academically appropriate learning contexts. Research about play is important, as it has the ability to further enhance and inform philosophy, practice, and policy

in ECED. The ultimate goal is that all children can equally access age and context appropriate opportunities for health, happiness, well-being, and optimal development.

This paper will review some tensions within perspectives, practices, and policies of play and play-based learning in ECED. The organization of this paper will consist of: (1) Play-based learning versus Academic learning; (2) Definitions of play and play-based learning; (3) The benefits and purposes of play and play-based learning; (4) The role of the adult in play and play-based learning; (5) Limitations, obstacles, and implications of play and play-based learning.

Review of Literature

Play-based Learning vs Academic Learning in ECED

In the past few decades, we have seen an emphasis towards school readiness and academics in Early Childhood Education, transforming many settings into places where: Academics are being pushed and play is being squeezed out. A report conducted by the Alliance for Children, about 10 years ago, regarding the situation at the time; stated that:

“Two few Americans are aware of the radical changes in Kindergarten practice in the last ten to twenty years. Children now spend far more time being instructed and tested in literacy and math than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their imaginations. Many Kindergartens use highly prescriptive curricula which they may not deviate. Many children struggle to live up to academic standards that are developmentally inappropriate ... At the same time that we have increased academic pressure in children’s lives through inappropriate standards, we have managed to undermine their primary tool for dealing with stress – freely chosen, child-directed, intrinsically motivated play” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 15).

During this time, Nicolopoulou (2010) also wrote about the current alarming situation: “Across the board, play is being displaced by a single-minded focus on teaching academic skills through direct instruction. This emphasis on more didactic, academic, and content-based approaches to preschool education comes at the expense of more child-centered, play-oriented, and constructivist approaches, which are dismissed as obsolete or simply crowded out” (p. 1). Many academic-focused practices and policies may seem like practical, profitable, and beneficial initiatives, which are well-intentioned and have children’s best interests in mind. However unfortunately, they contradict much of what we know about young children’s learning and development and about the experiences that promote them (Miller & Almon, 2009). It is important to note that context appropriate direct instruction can be beneficial to young children if it is an aspect of a balanced approach and curriculum. “But a one-sided, or even exclusive, focus on top-down training in specific academic skills is developmentally inappropriate and counterproductive” (Nicolopoulou, 2010, p. 2). Such approaches are lacking many of the healthy, balanced, and appropriate practices we know are beneficial to helping children thrive in sensitive developmental early years. “Given what we know about the importance of play for young children’s intellectual, socioemotional, and physical development, suppressing it can have genuinely harmful effects” (Nicolopoulou, 2010, p. 2).

Years later, and other researchers have showed similar concerns about the push for academics at the expense of play. Significant research has demonstrated developmental and educational benefits of play; however, teacher-directed pedagogy still dominates many ECED classrooms and settings in Canada (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). A study by Peterson, Forsyth & McIntyre (2015), explored teachers’ perspectives on the following topics: Definitions of play, benefits of play, and challenges of play. This study included Kindergarten and Grade One

teachers, from Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. Research findings (2015), revealed that participants believed that play is an important part of Kindergarten and Grade 1 experiences. However, Grade 1 teachers claimed that demands of student achievement of curriculum outcomes limits their use of play in classroom activity, as they feel pressured to teach mandated curriculum. “As such our research emphasizes the need for educators, curriculum developers, policy makers, and researchers to place high priority on working together to address these competing demands and to challenge tenets of the play ethos that present tensions in their work with young children” (Peterson et al., 2015, p. 46).

Tensions, discussions, and debates concerning play and learning have also been occurring in many countries all over the world. Several researchers have expressed a concern for the existence of competing or opposing ideals of play and learning, which construct simple, rigid, and binary views. Nicolopoulou (2010) discussed the danger of these viewpoints, creating opposition between play and learning, claiming that: “A rigid dichotomy between play and learning may seem commonsensical, but it is deeply misguided” (p. 2). As a result, some researches have called for a need for constructing more complex, open, and connected views and approaches that can help guide balanced and complimentary pedagogy.

Definitions of Play and Play-based Learning in ECED

In the past, research regarding play and play-based learning has provided unclear or narrow definitions, concepts, and approaches. However, a large body of current has demonstrated a much more open, clear, and concise representation of the topic. A study by Pyle and Danniels (2017) explored 15 public Kindergarten classrooms in three school districts in Ontario, Canada. This study (2017) has made significant contributions to the existing body of

research on the topic because it helped construct and continue to refine more concrete and holistic definitions of play and play-based learning. According to Pyle & Danniels (2017), the term ‘free play’ is usually used to describe play that is child directed; child centered (locus of control is with the child), voluntary, spontaneous, flexible, and often involves pretend play or many other types of play. In contrast, ‘adult-guided play’ is usually described as the half-way point between direct instruction and free play, which can be child or adult initiated but the locus of control is with the child (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Play-based learning has commonly been described as a teaching approach including child-directed and playful aspects, in addition to some degree of adult guidance or scaffolded learning objectives (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Continuing to develop understanding, definitions and concepts are important because it can help establish a strong foundation of knowledge to continue to build upon. Providing clarity, not only enhances the existing body of research; but it also helps guide educational policies and practices. Hopefully this process can assist educators in developing a better understanding and some guidance on how to integrate play into their classrooms more effectively.

Questions surrounding the definitions, approaches, and activities that constitute play and play-based learning has been a popular topic of discussion and debate for years. Pyle & Daniels (2017) identified five different types of play, which are situated along what the authors call a play-based “continuum” (2017) ranging from child directed (free) play, to collaborative (guided) play, to teacher directed (instructed) play. The five different types of play included in this play-based learning continuum are: Free play, inquiry play, collaboratively designed play, playful learning, and learning through games (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Free play is often the most common form of play observed in early childhood settings. Free play is on the most child directed side of the continuum, in which the locus of control is with the child (Pyle & Danniels,

2017). Next there is inquiry play, which is similar to free play, as it is child initiated, related to child's interests, but the teacher extends the play through the integration of academic standards. Then there is collaborative play, which is child-directed play with educator support, identified as guided play. In collaborative play, the locus of control is shared, students make decisions about their play but are provided with guidance from the teacher in order to reach learning goals or objectives (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Mraz, Porcelli & Tyler, 2016). Then there is playful learning, which integrates academic skills into play contexts that are collaboratively created, guided by the adult, and control is shared between the child and adult (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). And lastly, there is learning through games, which is the most prescriptive type of play based-learning on the continuum, on the side of adult directed. Math, literacy, or other academic standards and skills are promoted through fun and engaging games (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

It should be noted, that there also seems to some discrepancy in the conceptualization (understanding and language) surrounding notions of play and play-based learning. The common occurrence of the two words being used vaguely or even interchangeably, may indicate that it is unclear what each word means and how each approach can be used. When Pyle & Danniels (2017) explored questions regarding the purpose of play and learning, a distinction emerged between the concepts of play and play-based learning. "The purpose of play-based learning is inherent in its name: to learn while at play. The purpose of play, in contrast, is far more open ended and frequently the topic of debate" (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). The purpose of play, the reason children play, and what activities constitute play are all issues that are often debated, however play is frequently described as joyful, engaging, and about the process not the outcome (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In the case of play, typical notions of learning do not need to occur, therefore, play-based learning and play could be considered to be two distinct constructs.

The Benefits and Purposes of Play and Play-based learning in ECED

There is considerable literature on the importance of play and play-based learning in early childhood settings. Since the early 2000s, there has been a shift towards the use of play-based pedagogy in ECED. In education systems all over the world, the value and benefits of play-based learning approaches have been acknowledged, explored and endorsed in both research and educational contexts. However, despite some consensus regarding the value of play, a tension still exists debating the exact roles, benefits, and purposes of play. “Research has shown that play can facilitate student learning by allowing children to build on and extend their previous knowledge and skills through interacting with others and the environment” (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). A number of studies have shown that different types of play positively influence children’s social cognition, emotional development, and self-regulation and academic learning, and in some cases over direct instruction (Lester & Russell, 2008; Pyle, DeLuca & Danniels, 2017; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Furthermore, recent advances in neuroscience show that play has a “significant role in the development of the brain’s structure and chemistry, which gives rise to emotional and physical health, well-being and resilience, as well as laying the foundation for cognitive functioning and social competence” (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 45).

Despite the fact that many viewpoints concerning the benefits and purposes of play exist, Pyle, DeLuca & Danniels (2017) stated that overall, two distinct perspectives of the role of play have emerged: Play for developmental learning and play for academic learning. This report by Pyle et al. (2017) was a comprehensive review of research on play-based pedagogies in Kindergarten education. This review analyzed 168 articles that addressed play-based learning for children, aged 4-5. The authors (2017) stated that the majority of previous research endorsed play as being an important part of early learning. However, the fact that two distinct perspectives

concerning the role of play for developmental or for academic learning, indicates that there are different perceptions about the value, role and benefits of play. Pyle et al. (2017) explained that this division within research suggests a need to move away from simple and binary views of pedagogy and towards more open and complex views. This recommendation called for an integration of a variety of perspectives and pedagogies of different types of learning through play, which are seen as complementary rather than incompatible.

Furthermore, Pyle and Bigelow (2015) conducted a study that investigated teachers' perceptions about the purpose of play-based learning in three Canadian schools. The goal of the study was to explore three teachers' approaches to integrating play-based learning in their Kindergarten classrooms, in public schools in a school district in Ontario. Data from each classroom was collected and analyzed to create three unique representations showing the relationship between purposes of play and implementation of practices of play within each setting. The results were displayed as individual class profiles, which revealed three distinct approaches to integration of play and learning in kindergarten classrooms: (1) "Play as peripheral to learning," (2) "Play as a vehicle for social and emotional development," and (3) "Play as a vehicle for academic learning" (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015, p.3). The authors explained that detailed data such as this can provide important insights regarding perspectives, purposes, and practices of play in early learning environments.

In addition to representation in literature, views concerning the benefits and purposes of play, are also being reflected in current policies and mandates, such as; The Play Today B.C. Handbook (2019), The B.C. Early Learning Framework (2019), the B.C. Curriculum and Core Competencies (2019). For example, The Play Today B.C. Handbook (2019) states: "The experiences of children's play have a profound impact on all areas of their growth and

development” (p.1). In addition, the B.C. Early Learning Framework (2019) states: “This framework values play as vital to children’s learning, growing, and making meaning” (p. 27). However, despite the current state of research promoting the benefits of play and policy recommending play, friction still exists; including a great deal of discrepancy within early childhood educator’s perspectives and practices of play. Data from studies, such as Pyle & Bigelow (2015); and Pyle et al. (2017) are significant because they show specific ways teachers can integrate play and play-based learning (to foster developmental or academic goals) into the curriculum.

The Role of the Adult in Play and Play-based Learning

A number of diverse viewpoints have emerged regarding the role of the adult in play. In the study, Pyle & Danniels (2017), the authors examined the role of the teacher in play-based pedagogy and found that two different teacher profiles emerged: (1) A belief that play and learning are separate constructs and the role of the teacher is not central in play; and (2) A belief that play could support academic learning and that teachers can play an important role in play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). The first perspective is that play is beneficial for social and emotional learning, so the role of the adult is to be passive and should “support but not disturb” or “hijack” the play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). As a result, some educators philosophically oppose the notion of guided play because it is disruptive and interfering to learning that is naturally occurring. An alternate perspective is that play provides great opportunities for children to explore, learn, and internalize academic skills and concepts, so adult involvement is encouraged in order to support, guide, and extend children’s learning (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). This perspective of the adult’s role as active is seen as being effective because learning experiences are powerful and can incorporate targeted skills into the joyful, engaging, and motivating realm

of children's play. With this approach, educators can use this method as an alternative to direct instruction by intentionally facilitating play-based learning experiences that integrate desired learning outcomes. While tensions exist, pulling these two views of the role of the adult in opposite directions, perhaps both of these approaches can be beneficial to play pedagogy.

Limitations, Obstacles, and Implications of Play in ECED

The definitions, roles, purposes, and benefits of play to children's developmental and academic learning have been discussed and debated in a wide range of research. Differing perspectives and practices of play can make it challenging for educators to productively integrate play-based pedagogies into their classrooms (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). This point was also discussed by Youmans, Kirby & Freeman (2017), who explained that many educators report a lack of understanding of the purpose of play-based learning, how to implement it effectively, and what their role should be. Youmans et al. (2017) further explained that this is concerning because educators are often instructed to provide time for play without a clear understanding about how it can be used to support student developmental and academic learning. As a result, early childhood educators are not optimizing the benefits of play that a strong play-based learning program can offer. To add to this point, Pyle and Bigelow (2016) stated that more research examining the benefits of particular types of play could be powerful to educators' ability to develop meaningful pedagogies and policies of play.

Youmans et al. (2017) conducted a study that investigated the effects of the Ontario Full-Day Early Learning-Kindergarten (FDELK) program on children's early cognitive and academic development. Results revealed that there was essentially no benefit for students participating in the FDELK program when compared to students in Half-Day Kindergarten or Alternate-Day

programs. These findings suggest that changes are required to improve the FDELK program in areas including: “incorporating evidence-based guidelines and goals of play, reducing class sizes, and revising curriculum expectations to focus on SR [Self-Regulation], literacy, and numeracy skills” (Youmans et al., 2017). Interestingly, the results of this study are in contrast to other research findings and reviews of Kindergarten programs, which showed three main learning benefits associated with FDELK: “more instructional time, better academic outcomes, and the promotion of SR” (Youmans et al., 2017, p. 2). Ultimately, Youmans, et al. (2017) stated that they believe that the FDELK program does have the potential to meet the needs of students through play-based learning; however, changes to the program need to be made to achieve this. Therefore, data collected in this study (2017) illustrated that while play-based programs can have the potential to support students learning, it does not happen automatically and it is not a guarantee. As explained by Youmans et al. (2017) further research on the pedagogy of play is important to inform beliefs, practices, and roles of teachers in supporting student development and learning through play.

Discourse about striving towards improvements in pedagogy have been occurring in many countries all over the world. For example, in Australia, researchers and early childhood educators have been asking important questions, such as: “What are the pedagogical issues in ECED that most concern you?” (Barblett, Knaus & Barratt-Pugh, 2016). In this study (2016), research was conducted with 200 Western Australian early years educators in order to discuss their most significant early childhood pedagogical issue or concern. Findings showed that educators were most concerned about the “... erosion of play-based learning and the tension about the use of play as a legitimate pedagogical tool in early years programs” (Barblett et al., 2016, p. 36). Lack of play pedagogy and policy in ECED, has a number of implications in terms

of achieving the greatest quality of learning and teaching, which affects our children, educators, parents, families, schools, communities, the future of our societies, and the state of the world globally.

Conclusion

Over the years, I have observed a variety of trends, changes, extremes, and tensions in ECED. However, as an educator, I feel hopeful for a bright future as we strive to for balance as we “inspire and support the creation of rich, joyful early childhood spaces where children and adults construct knowledge about learning and living together” (B.C. Early Learning Framework, 2019, p. 8). Creating early learning contexts that are reflective, critical, and transparent in discourse is an important step in the awareness of contradictions or tensions that exist within ECED. Open discussions of competing knowledge regarding the impact of pedagogical practices and policies are vital so that children’s health, happiness, well-being, and development are recognized. As the B.C. Early Learning Framework states: “The intention is to put forward an image of every child as capable and to promote inclusive pedagogies through discovery and inquiry...” (2019, p. 13). Furthermore, the Early Learning Framework and the Core Competencies of the B.C. Curriculum aim “...to support educators in designing environments that are flexible, responsive, and relevant to their local community so that children and adults think and learn together” (2019, p. 13). Perhaps such reflective practices and policies can help educators incorporate balanced, inclusive, holistic approaches that are child-centered and focus on the unique context of each child.

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