

**PLAY AND LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION: TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES**

**BRINCAR E APRENDER NA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL: TENSÕES E
DESAFIOS**

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Abstract

International research promotes the value of play for children's learning and development. However, in early childhood education the development of national policy frameworks highlights a tension, and possible contradiction, between play for its own sake, and educational play. This paper explores these two positions, drawing on contemporary socio-cultural theories. Freely chosen play reflects children's choices, interests and inquiries, and is understood as complex socio-cultural activity. Educational play focuses on curriculum goals and outcomes, and requires early childhood educators to plan for play in ways that direct children's learning towards those goals. Recent research on children's interests and inquiries offers solutions for pedagogical approaches that connect the curriculum as lived experiences, and curriculum as planned experiences, both of which reflect children's cultural repertoires and peer cultures.

Keywords: Play, socio-cultural theory, policy, curriculum, pedagogy

Resumo

Pesquisas internacionais promovem o valor do brincar para a aprendizagem e o desenvolvimento das crianças. No entanto, na educação infantil, o desenvolvimento de quadros de políticas nacionais destaca uma tensão, e uma possível contradição, entre o brincar por si só e o brincar educativo. Este artigo explora essas duas posições,

baseando-se em teorias socioculturais contemporâneas. O brincar livremente escolhido reflete as escolhas, os interesses e as indagações das crianças, e é entendido como uma atividade sociocultural complexa. As brincadeiras educativas concentram-se nos objetivos e nos resultados do currículo e exigem que os educadores de infância planeiem as brincadeiras de forma a direcionar a aprendizagem das crianças para esses objetivos. Investigação recente sobre os interesses e questionamentos das crianças oferece soluções para abordagens pedagógicas que ligam o currículo como experiências vividas e o currículo como experiências planejadas, ambos refletindo os repertórios culturais das crianças e as culturas de pares.

Palavras-chave: brincar, teoria sociocultural, políticas, currículo, pedagogia

Introduction

In early childhood education (ECE), a consistent claim can be found across most regions of the world, and across different education and cultural contexts: all forms of play support children's learning and development. There is broad agreement that play is freely chosen, is driven by children's choices and motivations, involves pretense and imagination, and is usually social and relational. Many of the claims that are made about the relationship between play, learning and development are underpinned by an extensive body of research, crafted over many decades, and across cultures, drawing on a range of disciplinary perspectives, including the learning sciences, social sciences, the creative arts, and technology and engineering. New perspectives have emerged from the study of digital technologies, especially the use of gamification in many areas of contemporary life. Thus we have a rich tapestry of research that weaves together a picture of play and playfulness as complex socio-cultural activity that is important for human beings across the lifespan. The qualities inherent in play, such as cognitive flexibility, imagination, sociability, creativity and inventiveness are desirable in all societies, especially in relation to the transformative impacts of digital technologies in all areas of our lives.

Many national policy frameworks for ECE provide further validation for play by recognizing its immediate benefits and impact on future achievements. However, alongside these positive validations for play, there are unresolved tensions and challenges, depending on the levels of policy advice, guidance or prescription for educators. This paper examines these tensions and challenges in light of policy frameworks, by contrasting play for its own sake, and educational play. The first section examines play for its own sake, and grounds the benefits for children, focusing on their

peer cultures and the collaborative development of shared interests. The second section examines educational play, specifically how this is framed in policy documents, particularly guidance on curriculum and pedagogy. The discussion draws on research evidence to consider potential solutions, with implications for educators' knowledge and practice, and how they might resolve some of these tensions and challenges.

1. Play for its own sake

When children participate in play for its own sake, they are perhaps closest to free play where they are able to follow their impulses, motivations, interests and choices. Of course, truly free play has the inherent tension that children can express free will but at the same time impose their own rules to plan, direct and sustain the play (especially socio-dramatic play which is considered to be a mature form of play). Their ability to self-regulate is situated in the imaginary context and meanings of the play activity, and the pleasure and satisfaction that children typically experience.

Research on children's free play makes many claims to its benefits in the domains of development (cognitive/metacognitive, physical/embodied, social/relational and affective) and specific benefits in areas of learning such as literacy (Brooker, Blaise & Edwards, 2014; Stagg-Peterson & Friedrich, 2022) and mathematics (Worthington & van Oers, 2016). Research on children's peer cultures has noted the significance of play for social affiliation and co-operation (Chesworth, 2019), for sharing multimodal, cultural and linguistic repertoires (Rogoff, Correa-Chávez & Dexter, 2015; Tatham-Fashanu, 2021), for building relationships with peers and adults and taking up powerful social roles (Stagg-Peterson, Young Jang & Tjandra, 2020). Children can be actively involved in co-creating their own developmental environments, where they are able to express their agency, identities, interests, heritages, languages and cultural practices. Research on play during the Covid-19 pandemic indicates its significance for supporting children's well-being and resilience, and enabling them to make sense of what was happening around them. Although many children had reduced opportunities to play with peers and kin, evidence indicates that digital technologies provided playful ways of maintaining relationships and connectedness (Cowan et al., 2021), and integrating knowledge about the pandemic into their play (Dýfjörð & Hreiðarsdóttir, 2022).

Play for its own sake enables children to follow their own agendas and interests, and to be immersed in activities that embody the qualities of playfulness (Wood, 2014). The cultural repertoires and knowledge that children spontaneously draw on in their free play activities are valuable in their own right, and take on new meanings in ECE

contexts. As play progresses in complexity, children develop their play skills, such as knowing how to join and contribute ideas to a game or play theme, how to share resources and deal with conflict, and how to manage emotions, especially when the boundaries between play/not play can be porous.

However, it is difficult for educators to identify what knowledge children are bringing into their play, how this is shared, and what meanings are being co-constructed. This is because free play does not follow the patterns and hierarchies of development and learning that are set out in curriculum guidance documents. Furthermore, play skills and knowledge do not appear as curriculum goals. Play can take different forms; play routines and events can unfold over time, and the power of imagination and pretense means that play resources can be used for different symbolic purposes. So in an education setting, it is a challenge for educators to keep track of play, and especially to identify what children are actually learning.

In ECE settings, play is always framed by the space, resources, routines and rules, which can impose constraints, but at the same time offer opportunities for play that would not be available in their homes. Although some of the limitations on play for its own sake arise from the ECE context, the next section indicates that other challenges arise when we consider the expectations set out in policy frameworks for educational play.

2. Educational play

The previous section indicates that research on children's freely chosen play has always been concerned with its purposes and benefits. Play remains a complex space for research that brings together theory and practice, with the addition of policy as a third dimension. A significant shift in the last 25 years has been the introduction of national policy frameworks for ECE, where play remains an important element but has to earn its place in terms of its educational benefits. This is because policy frameworks include specific outcomes or goals that children are expected to achieve on transition to school (a transition that can take place between age 4-7 depending on country-level policies). Play must contribute to these outcomes to ensure that children are 'school ready', which often means that they experience the pedagogical transition from play-based to formal pedagogical approaches.

The expansion of provision for children before compulsory education, and guidance for practice, have been informed by a complex inter-relationship between the learning sciences and the demands of educational reform. The dynamic nature of policy making and policy travel means that similar discourses about play circulate at supra-national levels for example through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development. Policy discourses are taken up at national/local levels, but not in linear ways. Research indicates that although typically Western validations of play circulate internationally, the cultural-historical evolution of individual nations results in mixing and re-mixing of ideas, heritages and practices (Roopnarine et al., 2018).

Analyses of early childhood policy frameworks indicate that play has earned its place within the broad recommendations for play-based learning, play-based curriculum and play-based pedagogy (Hedges, Stagg-Peterson & Wajskop, 2018). The capture of play in policy discourses and curriculum frameworks is a mixed blessing because there are varying interpretations of what counts as play, and what play is expected, or required to produce. The demands being made of play, of children, and of their educators, reflect contemporary socio-political framings of ECE, including greater attention to academic content, and measurable outcomes. These demands are evident in countries that have traditionally been committed to Euro-American values about play-based learning, and countries or regions where ECE is being developed or reconceptualised to address social diversities and the perspectives of historically marginalized communities (Roopnarine et al., 2018; Stagg-Peterson & Friedrich, 2022; Yang & Li, 2019).

Finding a 'best fit' between the apparent orderliness of curriculum frameworks and the complexities of play remains problematic (Ruscoe, Barblett & Barratt-Pugh, 2021; Wood, 2020), and the urge towards 'structured' and 'guided' play leans more towards apparent orderliness. With the play/education debates, there are different positions. Free play is seen as relevant for achieving developmental goals, and adult-guided/structured play being more appropriate for achieving academic goals (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). This bifurcation indicates that biological/maturational perspectives retain power within the field, informed by child development theories. At the same time, curriculum frameworks in different countries exert different degrees of pressure on educators, according to the levels of prescription of defined outcomes (for example in England) (Wood, 2020), and description of indicative goals (for example in New Zealand and Australia) (Barblett, Knaus & Barratt-Pugh, 2016; Gunn & Nuttall, 2019; Wood & Hedges, 2016). Pyle and Danniels (2017) propose that 'purposeful play' sits on a continuum between developmental goals and academic goals, but this remains a problematic construct depending on whose purposes are privileged – those of the children, or those of the educators. For Vygotsky, school instruction and work are "compulsory activity based on rules" (1978, p. 104). This is not to downplay how children engage with the knowledge around which curriculum content is framed, as they are being/becoming mathematicians, geographers, artists, technologists, readers, writers, designers and players. However, children also draw on sources and funds of knowledge from their own cultural repertoires to inform how they experience and build curriculum (Chesworth 2016; 2019; Hedges, 2021; 2022; Hill & Wood, 2019).

Policy versions of play are concerned more with structured play than with children's freely chosen play, to ensure that play contributes to outcomes and goals, and is a means of supporting children's progress and achievements. Policy statements thus position play within a wider discourse of raising standards and improving children's outcomes. In other words, educational play must earn its place within the system, in order to justify the economic investment in ECE.

This brief overview indicates that there are tensions between the established discourses about the value of play, and the policy expectations that foreground planned and purposeful play, with varying degrees of teacher involvement and direction. Thus questions need to be asked about whether play is always destined to be in tension with policy, and are there other factors that work against play for its own sake?

3. Resolving the challenges and tensions: curriculum and pedagogy

The focus on mediation, co-construction and curriculum as lived experiences draws attention to the pivotal role of pedagogy in ECE settings, especially the range of pedagogical approaches and strategies that educators use to connect play, learning and teaching. Pedagogy is understood in an expansive way, integrating concerns with ethics, equity and inclusion, and understanding learning from the perspective of children's goals, as well as the goals of the curriculum. Pedagogy connects the curriculum as lived experiences, and curriculum as planned experiences, both of which reflect children's cultural repertoires and peer cultures. This position is undoubtedly demanding of the skills and knowledge of educators, and practice-focused research continues to engage with the challenges of integrating teacher-directed and child-centred pedagogies, which are often problematised as being not just in tension but in opposition (Arnott & Duncan, 2019; Cheng Pui-Wah et al., 2015).

Research indicates how educators can accomplish integrated pedagogical approaches. Fler (2015) focused on the pedagogical roles of educators inside and outside imaginary play situations. Detailed analyses of practice indicated that educators in the study acted in five different ways according to the physical positioning or proximity to the play, the levels of intersubjectivity between adults/children, resourcing and supporting the play theme, being engaged with the play, and being inside the play, in imaginative but restricted ways. Fler's research exemplifies the pedagogical decisions and actions that educators take in relation to play, and the challenges of sustaining imaginative play against more instrumental discourses within ECE policy frameworks. Fler (2020) subsequently used the concept of Conceptual Playworld to develop an intervention study where teachers collaborate to build collective zones of proximal development in an ECE setting. Drawing on Vygotsky's cultural-historical theories of play, and subsequent interpretations, Fler documents

how the teachers interacted with children during group times to create new developmental conditions within the ECE environment, and in their collective practices. The teachers supported collective imagining, enabled children to extend the collective imaginary situation of the play themes, supported children to develop imaginative possibilities and scenarios through the 'what if' and 'as if' imaginary perspectives, and extending the plot of the play activities over time.

Hill and Wood (2019) report an ethnographic study of children's interests, working theories and funds of knowledge in free play activities. The study took place in an international school in Switzerland with children age 5-7 years old. Analysis of the children's freely-chosen play activities showed how their play themes incorporated knowledge and emerging concepts across a range of themes:

- Death-rebirth, death and dying
- Good and evil, bad/good, disobedience and punishment
- Tools and equipment
- Gender – what it means to be a boy/girl
- Family roles and relationships
- Babies and being a baby
- Animals and being an animal
- Popular culture and everyday events in the news.
- Myths and legends, Disney, fairy and folk tales
- Power and control – agency, what it means to be a child/adult
- Knowledge and coming to know – sources of knowledge

Arnott and Duncan (2019) conducted research on the pedagogic cultures of ECE, focusing on play and creativity in a nursery and a science museum in Scotland. They argue that planning for play is a multidimensional task that must incorporate space, interpersonal collaborations and materials not just as characteristics of provision, but also as contextual cues for understanding their impact on children's learning, and on creative play. Similar to Fleer (2015; 2020) their findings indicate the many dynamic ways in which educators can facilitate creative play by considering or tweaking the make up of the pedagogic culture from an ecological perspective. Their research did not aim to offer a typology of creative play that could be replicated. Rather they portrayed the complex and interrelating processes at work in both settings, and present

creative play as a dynamic, multifaceted and relational process, shaped by the pedagogic culture.

Practice-focused research offers contrasting theoretical perspectives on children's learning that provide guidance for educators, and can potentially enable them to reconcile the different tensions and challenges within their provision. Contemporary theories offer counterpoints to the normative basis of child development theories, by foregrounding children's cultures, particularly the richness and diversity of the interests and funds of knowledge they bring from their home, family and community lives (Chesworth, 2019; Hedges, 2021; 2022; Stagg-Peterson & Friedrich, 2022). Many recent studies of play in ECE settings indicate that there does not need to be a separation between adult-led and child-initiated activity, or between play and work. The use of digital technologies, and their flexibility is dissolving boundaries between formal and informal learning; research on children's converged (traditional/digital) play reveals the different sources of knowledge on which they draw, and the new affordances of apps and devices (Marsh, 2017). From the perspectives of educators and children, curriculum can consist of planned experiences, and intentional teaching, but can also draw on children's lived experiences as sources of curriculum. Far from being the simple occupation of childhood, play is complex in its different forms and manifestations. More importantly, what children choose to do in and with their play is varied and often unpredictable, but always reveals a wealth of insights into their funds of knowledge and funds of identities, which include their home and family practices, their interests, questions and ongoing inquiries.

So what are the key principles for early childhood educators as they plan for play and learning in their settings? First, play is one of many ways in which children learn and develop, and typically encourages learning-relevant processes such as exploration, experimentation, imitation, metacognition, as well as developing interests and inquiries. These processes enable children to move from exploration - 'what does this do?' to inquiry and knowledge creation 'what can I/we do with this?'

Second, children's interests are not just manifest in their activity choices (such as sand, water, building blocks). Over time, their choices reveal processes of sustained inquiry, and the motivation to become more skilled and knowledgeable about their social, cultural and material worlds. Learning through play is not just about storing new knowledge or information: it is embodied, relational and dynamic. Being a skilled player is a developmental achievement in its own right, and may be highly prized and rewarded in later life in some occupations.

Educators use a range of pedagogic strategies and create pedagogic cultures that pay attention to equity, diversity and inclusion because all children's funds of knowledge can become sources of curriculum. Research shows us that children's

interests extend beyond curriculum goals, and incorporate their deep concerns with relationships with humans and non-humans; morals and ethics; existential matters of life, death and dying; and everyday events, including catastrophes and the pandemic. In other words play may be both a mirror that reflects children's social and personal interests and knowledge, as well as the engine for driving, motivating and directing further learning.

Policy versions of educational play are concerned with how play can produce or at least contribute to specific learning outcomes in curriculum frameworks. Policy frameworks are the source of tensions and challenges for educators as they strive to manage play for its own sake and educational play. In addition, because they have to manage other policy goals such as school readiness it is easy to understand how they become pulled towards teacher-led formal activities in order to 'deliver' the desired outcomes. Play has been tamed and distorted, to the extent that planned and purposeful play may say more about educators' intentions than it does about children's interests and choices. When educators are pulled between different demands, they may not have the time to observe children's play, and may miss valuable opportunities for interacting, scaffolding and understanding children's meanings and intentions. In contrast, integrated pedagogical approaches enable practitioners to move across adult-initiated and child-initiated activities in ways that build on children's interests, connect interests with curriculum goals, and incorporate children's funds of knowledge.

Conclusion

ECE has been the focus for substantial investment, with expansion in provision and improvements in training and qualifications for educators. Many countries now have a policy framework that sets out statutory responsibilities for the sector, and may include guidance on curriculum and pedagogy. Many of these frameworks are informed by different theories and research that reflect established notions of good practice with young children. However, these developments have also highlighted debates and challenges about curriculum and pedagogical approaches, especially in frameworks that set out developmental levels and learning goals that should be achieved at the start of primary school.

The contemporary research presented here offer contrasting ways of understanding children's learning, and the role of play in ECE. The ongoing endeavor of integrating play into provision indicates the complexity of educators' roles in planning and enacting a curriculum that both reflects the guidance in national frameworks, and respects children's interests and funds of knowledge as sources of curriculum. The traditional binaries of adult-led and child-initiated activities, play and work, formal and informal learning are being challenged by co-constructive approaches

that integrate structure and flexibility. Policy concerns with ‘effective’ or ‘the most effective’ pedagogies do not align with recurring attention to diversities, dialogue, meaning-making, scaffolding (amongst peers and peers/adults), multimodality, and the complex processes of inquiry that are evident as children develop and follow their interests. However, these theories also present challenges for early childhood educators to consider all elements of their provision, including the resources, the environment, the rules and structures, and the roles of educators in and out of children’s play. They need to consider how all elements of their provision develop the overarching pedagogic culture and sustain children’s peer cultures.

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Bionote

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Received: July 2022

Published: September 2022