

Perspectives of play and play based learning: What do adults think play is?

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Abstract

Adults, including early childhood teachers and caregivers (i.e., parents, carers, kinship members), have an important role in supporting young children's learning through play in early childhood. However, little consideration has been given to the relationship between these significant adults' perspectives of play and the play experiences of young children. Various conceptualisations of play and play-based learning influence the decisions adults make about the provision of play in early childhood. This can make it difficult to support adults in their understandings of the need for play in young children's lives. We propose that more needs to be known about what significant adults think play is. This new knowledge would enhance professional learning and parent education programs in the early childhood education and care sector for increasing children's opportunities to learn through play.

Keywords: parents, caregivers, early childhood, play, early childhood teachers

Introduction

It has been more than 30 years since the right to play for all children was first articulated in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child [UNCRC] (1989), Article 31. Throughout this period much has been written about young children's play and the role of significant adults in supporting learning through play in early childhood. In seeking to maximise opportunities for children's play, a challenge for the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector is in supporting significant adults, such as early childhood teachers (ECTs) and caregivers (i.e., parents, carers and kinship members), in their understandings of the need for play in young children's lives. This is because there are many variations in perspectives of play and play-based learning which underpin the decisions significant adults make about the provision of play in early childhood.

Conceptualisations of play are influenced by numerous theoretical orientations (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008) such as cultural-historical, cognitive developmental, post-developmental, and anthropological (Blaise et al., 2014). The need for free play (i.e., child directed, voluntary play) and/or structured play (i.e., goal orientated) is also debated, as well as pedagogical approaches to play, including modelled, guided and teacher-directed (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). The decisions adults make about children's opportunities for play are shaped by their perspectives of these conceptual elements, which may vary. This is a problem for the ECEC sector because contemporary approaches to adult learning are based on the premise that learner interests, needs, and prior knowledge provide the foundations for building new knowledge (Chuang, 2021). Not knowing what significant adults think play is makes it difficult to support adults in their learning about play to increase its provision and maximise children's opportunities to learn through play in early childhood.

Despite conceptualisations of play being highly contested (Wood, 2009), there is consensus that children's access to rich play experiences in the years prior to formal

schooling enhances learning and developmental outcomes (Lake et al., 2022; Whitebread et al., 2017). Given that significant adults including ECTs and caregivers, mediate the provision of play-based learning opportunities in early childhood (Göncü & Gaskins, 2015), consideration should be given to the nature of the relationship between adults' perspectives of play and children's play experiences.

In this commentary article, we consider contributions from the literature about play and significant adults' (i.e., ECTs and caregivers) perspectives of young children's play, to better understand how the relationship between these perspectives and the provision of play may influence children's experiences of play in early childhood. We consider how play is conceptualised theoretically and discuss the influence of culture in shaping adults' perspectives of play. We draw attention to the need to understand the child's perspective on play (Einarsdottir, 2014) and acknowledge that the role of peers and peer play (Löfdahl, 2014) in early childhood is very important. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on the integral role of the adult. We discuss research about ECT and caregiver perspectives on play to better understand what adults think play is. Our reflections on the literature identify implications for the "fulfillment of young children's right to play" (Colliver & Doel-Mackaway, 2021, p. 566) through maximising children's access to play-based learning experiences in early childhood.

Conceptualising play

Play as a component of early childhood is difficult to define and scholarly efforts to do so have long been contested (Johnson & Wu, 2019). However, the importance of play for young children's learning and development is undisputed (Bergen, 2014; Lake & Evangelou, 2019; Hirsh-Pasek, 2009). Influenced by the ideas of early theorists such as Froebel (e.g., child-led play), Pestalozzi (e.g., children's unique interests), Comenius (e.g., children's natural inclination for learning), Locke (e.g., the role of social environments in shaping children's learning), Rousseau (e.g., child-centred play), Dewey (e.g., experiential learning),

Montessori (e.g., voluntary play), and the works of Piaget (e.g., developmental stages of play) and Vygotsky (e.g., play as a leading activity), most contemporary Western-European conceptualisations describe play as a fundamental part of early childhood (Roopnarine, 2015) and a natural way of learning (Edwards, 2021) in which children make sense of their world (Samuelsson & Pramling, 2014). Underpinned by the work of Vygotsky (1976), prevailing research on play has tended to apply a sociocultural lens (Whitebread et al., 2017) and drawn attention to the role of adults in it (McInnes et al., 2013). Attempts to label play have often been considered too broad (e.g., as activity or behaviour) or too narrow (e.g., educational play) which in either case loses meaning (Roopnarine, 2015). Our position is that play is culturally shaped, mediated by the environment, and an integral part of childhood. Play and learning have been described as ‘inseparable’ and something that children themselves do not always see as separate practices (Samuelsson & Pramling, 2014). Regardless, there are many types of play such as physical, symbolic and pretend play, play with objects and games with rules (Whitebread et al., 2017), which are known to benefit young children’s learning (e.g., social and emotional, cognitive, language, physical and academic - Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2013). However, not knowing what significant adults think play is as an informant of its provision, reduces the potential for the known benefits of play to be realised in the lives of all children.

While there is recognition that play and learning are inherently related, play and play-based learning are different concepts, yet frequently used interchangeably (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Play, however, is understood to be a child-centred practice (Weisberg et al., 2013) whereas play-based learning refers more specifically to the role of play. Play-based learning is described by Pyle and Danniels (2017) as a continuum moving from child-directed to collaborative and then to teacher-directed learning through play. While variations in conceptualisations of play persist, Göncü and Gaskins (2015) point to “direct and indirect

roles of adults in children's play" (p. 55). This can be through intentional interactions and involvement in children's play, the provision of physical spaces and resources, and through various levels of guidance (e.g., scaffolding— Wood et al., 1976, guided participation – Rogoff, 2003). For example, adults scaffold children's play through playful interactions and by setting up play experiences to facilitate children's participation in ways that they would be otherwise unable to do on their own (Wood et al., 1976). Guided participation involves adults meaningfully supporting children's involvement in everyday playful activities such as cooking (Rogoff, 2003). Tensions exist regarding the role of adults in children's play, such as which levels of guidance to provide, for what purpose and how often. For ECTs there is a need to be able to strongly advocate for these over what is sometimes manifested through external curriculum demands (Wood, 2009). Given the critical role of adults (i.e., ECTs and caregivers) in ensuring that children experience rich play opportunities as a continuum of play-based learning, it is important to understand the extent to which adults' perspectives of play guide this provision.

Culture, play and learning in early childhood

Culture has been described as a non-static, time and context-specific construct that is manifested both implicitly (e.g., values and beliefs) and explicitly (e.g., popular figurines and toys) (Reid et al., 2019, p. 978). For example, culture is manifested in implicit values associated with different types of play such as pretend play, or explicitly in the provision of play opportunities for children by adults, including access to outdoor play equipment such as swings and bikes, or through art play activities. Culture is also expressed throughout various time points (e.g., early childhood, adolescence) and contexts (e.g., family, preschool, playgroup) and is described as fuelling learning and development through reciprocal interactions between individuals and the social world where both are transformed (Reid et al., 2019). The decisions ECTs and caregivers make about children's play are influenced by

culture (Bodrova & Leong, 2019). For teachers, this includes values embedded in their training and engagement in the ECEC sector as well as the various time points and contexts worked in such as kindergarten or daycare. For caregivers, this includes values brought to their parenting role including generational values about playing outdoors (Parsons & Traunter, 2020), those associated with experiences as a first-time caregiver or caregiver of more than one child, and their involvement in settings such as playgroups or preschools (Hakemez-Paul et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2018). In seeking to ensure that all children have opportunities to learn through play it would seem important therefore, to understand how culture is represented in what adults think play is, and in informing its provision.

Culture is underpinned by shared beliefs and understandings, which shape interactions, learning and development (Anning et al., 2004). While all children play the purpose of play and what it looks like as an activity to support cultural learning varies across cultures (Reid et al., 2019). Some cultures (e.g., Western-European) place an emphasis on play as a form of inquiry-based learning which is reflected in curriculum documentation (e.g., Australia - Early Years Learning Framework, DEEWR, 2009) or as a framework for assessment (Arnold, 2015), while the purpose of play in some cultures can also be seen to provide respite from academic learning (e.g., Chinese culture - Luo et al., 2013). Children's play opportunities are guided by shared beliefs and understandings which are recursive in perpetuating culture. Children have their own goals for play and learn about adult (i.e., ECT and caregiver) goals for their learning and development through play (Göncü & Gaskins, 2015). Both are deeply embedded in culture. This suggests that cultivating shared understandings about play and the role of adults in it is critical for ensuring that play remains culturally relevant, and that all children reap its benefits.

The use of a bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) may provide a way for thinking about the relationship between significant adults' perspectives of play and

the play experiences of young children. Bronfenbrenner (1977) describes learning as occurring within five nested systems (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem) moving from the most direct influences of family and friends (microsystem) to indirect influences of culture (macrosystems) and time (chronosystems). In the bioecological model children actively shape their development through proximal processes – regularly occurring, reciprocal interactions between the child and the environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Using this model, the extent to which children learn through play is culturally influenced and only realised when cultural values are shared and experienced within one or more microsystems such as family, ECEC, school and/or neighbourhood (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This suggests that the extent to which the values about play inherent in the perspectives held by significant adults (i.e., ECTs and caregivers) in children’s lives are shared, must be considered if all children are to benefit from play-based learning opportunities in early childhood.

Child perspectives about play

Capturing children’s voices in research is recognised as a means of understanding their unique experiences (Sommer et al., 2010; Theobald et al., 2015). Research about children’s perspectives of play has sought to understand children’s participation in play in terms of power and agency. Einarsdottir (2014) notes that understanding children’s perspectives of adult roles, peer roles and who has control during play, can provide insights into the nature of play and what matters about play to children. Research has shown that children assign meaning to their play and unlike many adults, do not necessarily separate play and learning (Howard, 2010). A study examining 24 Hong Kong Chinese children’s (aged 3.5 to 6.3 years) perspectives of play and learning using informal and video-cued recall interviews in two kindergartens found that children described “play as learning” (Wu, 2019, p. 560). Children’s interpretations of their play connected to practical skills (e.g., cooking)

and rehearsal for adult roles (e.g., meal preparation). An Australian study (Colliver & Fleer, 2015) involving 28 children (aged two-to-five years), attending an ECEC centre in Melbourne collected 772 comments from children about their learning. Children's perspectives of their play were framed as an "expression of practice" (p. 1564) such as 'being a pirate' or 'making a paper dog'. The authors reported that children's "learning was based on their participation in the practice" (p. 1565). Another Australian study by Theobald et al. (2015) examined perspectives of play of 20 Australian children (aged three-to-four years) at preschool and found that there can be a mismatch between what adults and children think play is. For example, the children in this study did not see adult-controlled activities (e.g., listening activities) as play, even though the ECTs did. This research indicates that for significant adults who mediate children's access to play, knowing what children think about play can help to balance adult-centric views of its provision (Theobald et al., 2015). In the current paper the focus is on adults' perspectives of play which could be different to the child's experience, however, children need ECTs and caregivers to have shared understandings about play to ensure consistency in the provision of these experiences for maximising the benefits of participation.

Early childhood teacher perspectives of play

Research about ECTs perspectives of play affirms the centrality of play in early childhood (Bergen, 2014) as a universal activity, but also recognises that play is culturally specific (Rentzou et al., 2019). Rentzou et al. (2019) used a questionnaire to examine 212 ECTs' conceptualisations of play in eight countries. These countries were Greece, Turkey, Denmark, Italy, Spain, USA, Estonia, and Cyprus. They identified variations in how play is defined by ECTs which, in turn, influence pedagogical approaches in the early childhood classroom. For example, ECTs in Turkey, Estonia and Spain emphasised play as fun and entertaining. ECTs in Denmark, USA and Italy emphasised the social skills developed

through play. ECTs in Cyprus described creative aspects of play and ECTs in Greece referred to play in terms of children's learning. The study found that the "status of play" (p. 10) within each country could be linked to variations in ECTs perspectives of play between countries. The authors report that in countries such as Denmark childhood was highly regarded in policy and conceptualised as supporting the social and emotional development of children. In the Turkish sample, the prevailing cultural perspective was that 'free' play comes after learning, meaning that play in the early childhood classroom calls for the direct involvement of ECTs. Variations in adults' perspectives of play also exist within cultures and are influenced by personal experiences, education, and other factors (Rogoff, 2003). This has a flow-on effect in the early childhood classroom where the use of play serves diverse purposes for learning – and these purposes may, or may not, support optimal opportunities for children's learning through play.

Other studies have shown that ECTs' perspectives of play and their role in it influence how play is used in the classroom (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021). In countries where a connection between play and learning is embedded in culture, this is often reflected in teachers' pedagogical approaches and in the setting up of the learning environment to support children's learning through play. A systematic review (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) of ECTs views on learning found that ECTs in the 62 reported studies had varying views on the 'conceptual compatibility between play and learning' (p. 785). Although many ECTs identified a natural link between play and learning, this was not the case for all teachers in the reported studies. This is a concern because if ECTs are not identifying a link between play and learning then the children in their classrooms may miss out on opportunities for learning through play.

Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) further found an association between types of ECT involvement in children's play and preschool curriculum as part of the dominant culture (e.g.,

Asian and English speaking), but note that ECTs generally, describe their role as a facilitator of play. This could be in setting up the environment for free play or more direct adult involvement (Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2011). Theoretically linked to sociocultural perspectives (e.g., guided participation – Rogoff, 2003), the facilitator role encompasses a range of guided practices involving children’s cooperation with peers and adults in their learning. In a study using survey data to compare preschool teachers' views on children’s learning in six countries: Australia ($n=69$), Denmark ($n=1340$), Estonia ($n=720$), Germany ($n=82$), Greece ($n=72$) and Sweden ($n=68$), Broström et al. (2015) found that children’s learning was understood to be supported by adults’ involvement in play, including in creating conditions for children to make their own decisions as independent learners. The authors also reported that there were differences between countries regarding preschool teachers’ involvement in play which reflected how curriculum frameworks in these countries represented guided practices (e.g., as involvement in children’s activities) and prioritised skills (e.g., emphasis on cognitive and learning skills in the Estonian curriculum). Broström et al. (2015) note complexities in this role for teachers to “nurture, guide, lead, teach and scaffold children to help them reach their highest potential” (p. 825), but also to balance this with encouraging children’s independence and ability to problem solve. If all children are to experience rich opportunities to learn through play, it is important to understand how ECTs engagement with complexities in the facilitator role shape their perspectives informing the decisions made about adults’ involvement in children’s play.

Research identifies challenges experienced by ECTs which contribute to inconsistencies in their conceptualisations of play. Using survey methods with 101 kindergarten teachers in Ontario, Canada, Fesseha and Pyle (2016) identified three categories to describe teacher conceptualisations of play. These were: *play as separate from learning*, *play for social development*, and *play for social and academic development*. Teachers who

described play as separate from learning noted challenges associated with meeting the demands of curriculum (e.g., providing for play and specified learning outcomes separately). Teachers who described play for social development noted that parents' expectations for academic learning were seen as a barrier to implementing play-based approaches (e.g., children play at home and learn at school). For those who described play for social and academic learning environmental challenges such as access to resources (e.g., specialised toys and equipment) and staff support (e.g., educational assistant) were reported. The authors point to the need for research and policy to provide consistent definitions of play and play-based learning to guide ECTs practice. However, as Fesseha and Pyle's (2016) research indicates ECTs perspectives of play-based learning vary. This suggests that there would also be benefit in knowing more about what ECTs think play is as the foundations for building shared understandings at a grassroots level, alongside the identification of consistent definitions to guide practice.

Although it is reported that ECTs generally value play in the classroom, a lack of adequate preparation around training in play-based approaches as part of early childhood teacher education programs means that ECTs frequently adopt a structured and teacher-directed approach to play (Howard, 2010). Further, when prevailing cultural perspectives separate play and learning ECTs' effective implementation of a play-based curriculum is challenged. Fung and Cheng (2012) used classroom observations and interviews with 24 ECTs, 20 principals and 98 parents and found that despite the Hong Kong government's introduction of a play-based curriculum ECTs were driven to meet what they perceived to be parents' expectations for academic learning nested within the demands of Chinese culture for academic achievement. Other studies involving interviews with ECTs in Kenya (Ng'asiki, 2014) and interviews, observations and documents in two kindergarten settings in Hong Kong (Yang & Li, 2020) report similar findings. Described as a disjunction created by

Western-European conceptualisations of play being privileged in mandated curriculum in countries where play and learning are not culturally linked (Edwards, 2021), many ECTs find themselves challenged by a clash of personal, cultural and legislated perspectives. A way forward described by Gupta (2015) is to provide ECTs with the autonomy to engage with global *and* local discourses as equally important, to enable the linking of play and learning in theory and practice for teaching in evolving local cultures. In keeping with contemporary approaches to adult learning (Chuang, 2021) this would seem to indicate that in professional learning and ECT education programs there is a need to identify what adults think play is as the basis for engaging with local and global discourses to build shared understandings about the need for play in young children's lives.

Caregiver perspectives of play

International research has established the important role of caregivers in supporting young children's play-based learning in the home learning environment (HLE) (e.g., Abecedarian Project, Campbell et al., 2008 – United States; Early Home Learning Study, Hackworth et al., 2013 – Australia; Perry Preschool Project, Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997 - United States; Effective Provision of Pre-school Education study, Sylva et al., 2004 – United Kingdom). Like ECTs, caregivers' personal and cultural values and experiences influence both their interactions with children during play and the opportunities children have for play (Sigel, 1987). Given the established significance of the HLE in early childhood on children's life trajectories (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997), it is surprising that less seems to be known about caregivers' perspectives of play.

Children's learning and development benefits when formal education and family partnerships are strong (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013) and shared understandings about play are cultivated. Fisher et al. (2008) reported on two studies using questionnaires with 1130 mothers and 99 child development professionals to examine their beliefs about play and

learning. They found that mothers of children aged birth-to-five years and child development professionals in the United States, including ECTs, academics and psychologists, share many common views about unstructured play (i.e., free play, social play). The findings were not as clear regarding structured play defined as having clear goals (e.g., flashcard games, singing games), where mothers tended to ascribe academic learning to structured play over unstructured play. The authors contend that “play means different things to different people” (p. 314). Warash et al. (2017) surveyed sixty-eight caregivers (i.e., 34 mothers and 34 fathers) of preschool children in the United States about their perceptions of play and found that mothers placed a higher value on play than fathers did. They also found that caregivers were likely to value play less as their children got older. These findings suggest that more needs to be known about caregivers’ perspectives of play to support strong ECEC and family partnerships.

Other studies have also shown that caregivers’ perspectives of play vary. In the United Kingdom Parsons and Traunter (2020) examined qualitative and quantitative questionnaire data from sixteen parents of Foundation Stage children (aged three to five years) about their perceptions of learning through outdoor play and interview data from two staff members. They found that parents valued outdoor play for their children in terms of social and physical benefits but did not necessarily see value for children’s academic learning. Similar results relating to outdoor play are reported in other countries (e.g., Australia – Rouse, 2016; United States – Jayasuriya et al., 2016). Breathnach et al. (2016) examined caregivers’ perspectives of play in the first year of schooling. The authors drew on caregiver interviews from two small scale studies in Queensland, Australia and found that although perspectives were multifaceted and sometimes lacking congruence, caregivers valued play as a learning strategy. The findings indicate a need to understand the relevance of

play in early childhood contexts beyond preschool, for building strong caregiver-teacher relationships to support children's learning through play.

Some research about caregiver perspectives of play has also been undertaken in Australian playgroups as an informal education setting for caregivers and their children to be involved in play together (e.g., McLean, et al., 2017). This research suggests caregivers have tacit knowledge of children's play types (e.g., pretend, outdoor, art and craft play) and their children's interests, however, the extent that this supports the development of shared understandings to maximise children's opportunities for learning through play in early childhood is less understood.

The research is clear that children benefit when shared understandings about play exist between caregivers and ECTs, and when home and ECEC settings work together in a complementary manner to provide rich play opportunities for young children. Evangelou et al. (2013) evaluated the 'Room to Play' early childhood service model in the United Kingdom and found caregivers reported that positive caregiver-staff relationships were an important component of a successful model. In a mixed-methods study investigating the Early Learning Partnership (ELP) project in the United Kingdom using observations, interviews, and structured questionnaires (e.g., Home Learning Environment Survey), Goff et al., (2012) found that caregivers of children aged one-to-three years, held various perspectives of play and play-based learning which can serve as starting points for building productive relationships. For example, a willingness by caregivers to take on an active role in their children's learning through providing a stimulating environment provided the foundations for building shared understandings. Evangelou and Wild (2014) suggest that caregiver perspectives can be thought about in terms of awareness about play and skills for the provision of play – each on its own continua, and as building blocks for developing shared understandings and building capabilities to support children's play-based learning.

This research would seem to suggest that more needs to be done to develop shared understandings about play that can be applied across early childhood contexts (i.e., home, playgroups and preschool) internationally.

Conclusion

As one of the most widely ratified treaties in the world, the UNCRC (1989) Article 31 brought attention globally to the right to play for all children, but more than 30 years on the challenge of ensuring that all children benefit from participation in play remains. Significant adults' (i.e., ECTs and caregivers) mediate children's play experiences (Göncü & Gaskins, 2015) through the decisions they make about its provision. Supporting significant adults in their understandings of the need for play in young children's lives would help to increase children's play opportunities. However, more needs to be known about the perspectives of play and play-based learning informing the decisions ECTs and caregivers make about play. Through a bioecological lens (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) knowing more about what significant adults think play is, including theoretical and cultural influences on their perspectives, provides the foundations for building shared understandings in ECT professional learning and parent education programs. Further research must identify how best to find out what significant adults think play is so that all children can experience optimal learning through their participation in it.

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