

The Challenges of Defining and Discussing Play and Play Research

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As a primary teacher in Ontario, Canada, I embraced a play-based pedagogy. With the goal of enhancing the social, emotional, physical, and academic development of my young students, for over 30 years, I intricately wove unstructured and structured play into my daily classroom activities. Yet, after years of collegial conversations with my colleagues regarding play practices, I came to realize that we did not share a common understanding of play and its role in early years' education.

Although research has determined play to be a universal concept and an important part of the early education experiences for many young children around the world, similar to my own experience, the way in which teachers define play and incorporate play-based learning in their classrooms differs (Rentzou et al., 2018). While play is clearly a valued part of education within a variety of cultures, a shared understanding of play would enable teachers and researchers to communicate with each other more effectively on what play is and how it might support young children's learning. In this paper, drawing from my own experience and from the literature, I describe how teachers in multiple countries conceptualize play within their classrooms and interpret the form of learning, if any, that young children derive from play.

Conceptualizing Play

Educational researchers are at odds with how to universally define play. As such, there is no agreed upon research definition at this time (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Rentzou et al., 2018). I have a holistic view of children and how they learn. My definition of play includes child-initiated and adult-initiated activities that may occur indoors or outdoors, that inspire children to create meaning from their experiences and encourage creativity, imagination, learning, joy, and fun, while engaging their hearts and souls.

Extant educational research has determined universal characteristics associated with play including, "play as learning, play as fun, play as creativity, play as an opportunity to explore the world, and voluntary" (Rentzou et al., 2018, p. 10). For example, some American, Swedish, and Turkish educators describe play as "joyful" and "fun", referring to it as "children's work" (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010; Rentzou et al., 2018). Using terms often associated with the outcome of play rather than its definition, educators from Estonia, Spain, and Greece (Rentzou et al., 2018) similarly emphasize the characteristic of fun when defining play. In contrast, German educators focus on how they see children, defining play as a holistic practice that is child-initiated and focused on the child's interests (Wu & Rao, 2011; Wu et al., 2018). In a study involving Japanese and American educators, Izumi-Taylor et al. (2004) found that Japanese teachers define play as "the power of living" (p. 315), with

one Japanese participant explaining that “play is the child’s life itself and children learn how to live through play” (p. 315).

Play as Activity

With the absence of a common definition, teachers often weave their conceptualization of play with play practices in the classroom and characterize teacher-directed and child-initiated activities as play (Fresseha & Pyle, 2016; Rentzou et al., 2018). Within my own classroom, I characterized both child-initiated and teacher-guided activities as forms of play. For example, after re-reading a favourite classroom story, I would often engage my students in a teacher-guided drama lesson. First, as a group, we practiced repeating key phrases or dialogue that we had read in the book. Then I offered the students a mask, which I had created prior to the reading. After I modelled how to use it, some brave student would always volunteer to wear the mask and pretend to be one of the characters in the book using the dialogue we had practiced. We all laughed as we participated in drama scenes from the book, together as a large group and individually. Later, I provided materials for students to make their own masks. Then, during unstructured play time, students freely dramatized the story with their peers, changing the plot or adding their own characters. In my view, both teacher-directed and child-initiated drama involved joyfulness, learning, and play.

I also provided materials (e.g., Lego, trucks and cars, wooden building blocks, dinosaurs, link its, dominoes, and dolls), centres (e.g, a paint centre, a sand centre, a kitchen centre, and a drama centre), and tables (e.g., an art table, and a science table) to support my students’ unstructured play. Writing was a part of many of these activities, with students

creating pictures, booklets, and notes on their own.

Not all of my colleagues supported these forms of play in their classrooms. Although many offered teacher-guided play, they were reticent about supporting child-initiated play in the classroom, citing external factors rather than their own beliefs about what constitutes play or possible learning outcomes from play as reasons for its exclusion. For example, some of my colleagues preferred to solely use the teacher-guided model of drama and mask making, explaining they lacked classroom resources or were not comfortable with a classroom art table. Others expressed concerns about parental perspectives of these activities or were worried about resolving peer conflict that inevitably arose with child-initiated play due to the decrease in adult supervision. Clearly, the concept of play as an activity in early years’ classroom is contentious.

Learning Outcomes from Play

Research suggests that, worldwide, there exists variations with regards to the enactment of play in classrooms as well as in the way in which educators perceive the “compatibility between play and learning” (Bubuikova-Moan, 2019, p. 785; Rentzou et al., 2018). For example, educators from Greece, Spain, Turkey, Japan, United States, Germany, and Sweden understand social and emotional development as expected outcomes of play (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2004; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010; Rentzou et al., 2018; Wu & Rao, 2011; Wu et al., 2018). To meet these outcomes, German and Swedish educators prioritize unstructured playtime or free play in the classroom. They see free play as enhancing children’s social skills, decision-making, and imagination, and practice minimal teacher interference (Izumi-

Taylor et al., 2010; Wu & Rao, 2011; Wu et al., 2018).

Play was the foundation of learning in my classroom. I believe all forms of play enhance the development of young children's social, emotional, physical, and academic skills. As such, I offered a combination of structured and unstructured activities in my classroom. For example, I supported structured literacy and math activities during which children could practice specific skills such as letter sounds, vocabulary, counting, or addition. To support science, social studies, math, and language learning and to develop visual art skills, we played outdoor games and took group nature walks.

I believe the various unstructured play activities in which my students engaged provided them with further learning opportunities. For example, enacting their own version of the book we had previously read and discussed encouraged them to use their imagination and collaborate with peers. Making their own masks afforded them the opportunity to develop creativity. Engaging in outdoor free play on the playground with balls, hoops, and other materials developed their awareness of others, as well as their physical abilities.

Other teachers prioritize supporting academic learning over social and emotional development. Some, like my colleagues, may recognize the importance of play in young children's social and emotional development, but feel academic learning is best supported by play activities that are structured and teacher-guided. For example, the Chinese educators in a Hong Kong study (Wu et al., 2018) reported they did not have the time and space for children's unstructured play in their classrooms, and were concerned about parental perceptions, choosing instead to

focus on academic learning involving play. They perceive play and learning as separate constructs, describing classroom play as prescriptive, teacher-directed group activities that were systematic, structured, and intended to improve young children's cognitive and academic skills. In fact, Chinese educators do not use the term free play at all, with some even seeing play as "opposite to learning" (Wu & Rao, 2011, p. 471).

As substantiated by research (e.g., Wohlwend, 2009; Wu & Rao, 2011; Wu et al., 2018), many of my colleagues regarded a child-initiated, play-based approach to classroom learning as being in conflict with teacher-directed lessons that focus on the explicit skills students need to acquire in order to successfully navigate the assessment and accountability tests. Many said they felt pressured to prepare their young students to succeed with the grade 3 standardized testing mandated in Ontario. Since time in the classroom is limited, these colleagues communicated to me their belief that formal academic teaching accompanied by standardized measurements of children's learning provided proof to parents and administrators of student learning.

Conclusion

In this paper, drawing on examples from my own experience as a classroom teacher and from the literature on play in early years' classrooms, I demonstrated similarities and differences in how play and play practices are conceptualized within and between cultures. Based on my analysis, I see play in early years' classrooms as a complex concept which still lacks a consistent definition worldwide. Without a common understanding of the concept of play, authentic and reliable cross cultural comparisons either promoting the benefits of

play or drawing attention to the possible challenges will remain difficult. Additionally, confusion and frustration may ensue when stakeholders from various cultures are involved in international discussions regarding play, as without a common definition of the term, assumptions may be made that are faulty and lead to erroneous conclusions about how play is educationally enacted in various countries.

As opposed to creating a definition of play, it may be more appropriate for teachers and researchers to simply start with identifying characteristics of play in their own cultures and then identifying how these characteristics might translate in the classroom in order to support young children's academic learning. Many educators in my experience see play as both child-initiated and teacher-initiated. During my time in the classroom, I saw children having fun while participating in structured teacher-directed play designed to enhance not only academic learning, but also social and emotional development. It is critical that teachers and researchers be cautious when creating a definition or understanding of play, as it must honour the complex, multifaceted activity that children around the world are involved with both inside and outside of the classroom.

Author Biography

Andrea Liendo is a retired teacher who has over 30 years of experience teaching with young children. She has taught in Northern Ontario, Southern Ontario as well as in South America. She presently is a fourth year Ph.D. candidate in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto.

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