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Play and Learning

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Introduction

This article discusses historical and present-day notions of play and learning in the context of early childhood education (ECE).

The beginning of ECE

Early childhood education has two sources: the Froebel Kindergarten tradition[1] in Germany and the Infant School in Britain.[2] ECE learning has traditionally been considered different from learning in primary school, and play has had an important role in both traditions, but in different ways.[3]

In Kindergarten, the focus has been on developing the whole child rather than teaching specific subjects. The idea is that children should first develop social, emotional, motor and cognitive skills in order to be ready to later begin learning knowledge contents in primary school. At the same time learning materials have been developed for young children that focus their interest and attentions towards early mathematics learning.[4]

Further, according to the kindergarten tradition, children should be active in their early learning, supported by the teacher who should organise tasks that what will help the child develop various skills and attitudes, which in turn will create knowledge. For example, activities

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based on the theme of sheep could have children learning songs about sheep, making sheep drawings, listening to stories about sheep and learning about how the sheep's wool is made into fabric for clothing.[5] The idea with this type of learning is that the teacher plans activities or organises tasks for the children so that they learn by doing.[6] Play was introduced, by Froebel as a means for learning.[1] He used the notions of play, learning and work as three aspects of the child's experiences in kindergarten. Play was strongly related to solving mathematical problems by dealing with various materials and tasks. However, children could also play with other materials and organise role-play.

In the British Infant School tradition,[7] the educational approach was slightly different: Children were taught traditional school subjects during shorter lessons, and play became a form of relaxation in between the lessons. But here also play was considered important – given that children were not supposed to be able to concentrate other than for a short time – play was a way to recuperate before a new lesson.[8]

Play and Learning in the Field of ECE

In both the Kindergarten and Infant School traditions, play had and continues to have an important role in young children's education. Currently, in most ECE frameworks or curricula, play is considered important.[9,10,11,12] However, even though there are many books that discuss play and learning on an academic level,[13,14] research seldom studies how play and learning are related, or what function play has in the ECE system.[15] In practice, it seems it is taken for granted that play is the children's world and is crucial to their education. Further, the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child,[16] states that all children have the right to play. On one hand, it is hard not to view play as central to young children's lives. On the other hand, play is not part of all children's life, either in their neighborhood or in ECE,[17] even if all humans at heart could be argued to be playing individuals, as suggested by Huizinga.[18]

One can claim that ECE generally involves structured activities, for learning or pleasure, but also less structured activities, often called "free play." The notion of free play is generally understood as being the opposite of teacher-organized activities. In free play, children lead their activity and use their imagination, and no specific skills or knowledge are expected to be learned. Montessori [19] even talked about not letting young children read stories and fantasies (play with reality) before they first learn about reality. In an international comparison of young children's experiences in ECE in seven countries, it was obvious that play is central to the lives of all young

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children.[20] Also, in some countries it was not even a question of talking about the youngest children in terms of learning, other than that children learn when they play. Participants from most countries expressed the intention of finding a more up-to-date approach to early years education, and play was always considered an important part of the approach.

There is also a kind of rhetoric and belief in ECE that play is always positive, which is, actually not always the case.[21] The romantic view of young children's play is built on the idea that children learn when they play. However, in the context of ECE, there are specific skills and knowledge children according to curricula should be supported in developing and, therefore, activities to some extent have to be goal-directed.[22]

The Playing-Learning Child

In a meta-analysis of praxis-oriented research, Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson[23] formulated the concept of the playing-learning child. This is a child who does not separate between play and learning, and instead relates to the world around him or her in a playful manner. They create ideas, fantasize and talk about reality simultaneously. For example, when a teacher asks a child to draw a tree they studied during an excursion to the forest, the child may challenge the teacher by adding Winnie-the-Pooh to the drawing of the tree.[3] Approaches to ECE would differ in how teachers respond to this kind of suggestion: incorporate it or separate it (i.e., draw the tree from the forest first and then the child could play with reality!).

Children, particularly young children, in ECE have not yet learned to decipher what is to be considered learning and what is to be considered play, but they do allow themselves to be creative if the teacher gives them communicative space.[24] This means that the teacher also has to take the child's approach as a base for arranging a preschool approach built on the playing-learning child.

Learning while Playing in Early Years Pedagogy

What does the playing-learning child mean in everyday life in ECE? What does it take for a teacher to work according to this theoretical notion of children as playing-learning individuals in ECE? It puts demands on the teachers to adopt specific theoretical approaches, that is, theories built on communication and interaction. It also requires the teacher to look at knowledge in terms of the meaning children create, how they make sense of the world around them.

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Looking at current ECE practices, there are generally three forms of early childhood curricula: the “traditional” social pedagogy based on Froebel, the “academic” pedagogy based on school subjects and skills, and innovations such as “developmental pedagogy” in which play and learning are integrated through an investigative pedagogy. Sylva et al.[25] found that differences in pedagogy (linked to curricula) led to wide differences in children’s developmental outcomes. Thus, curriculum and pedagogy make a difference to children’s development as well as contribute to the success and well-being of society.

The concept of didactics (especially as understood from a European perspective) is central in some countries, especially in the Nordic preschools. Based on the German/European idea of “Buildung,” curriculum and pedagogy become integrated. Didactics focuses on the ways the teacher “points something out to children,” that is, directing children’s attention towards specific areas of knowledge, skills or attitudes that will enhance their development. Didactics is the crossroad between the learning object (what children should be supported in creating meaning about) and the act of learning (how children play-learn). Shared meaning-making depends on the teacher’s capacity to relate her/himself to the child within the learning situation. This approach is centred on children’s meaning-making.[22] This didactic approach is based on “variation as a fundamental aspect of learning,” framing the learning situation, social encounters and coordinating the child’s and the teacher’s perspectives. This means that there will be a space for each child to be involved with their experiences and to also use play and fantasy to try to make sense of the world around them. It is through communicative didactics that children can begin with a context-bound language and move towards an expansive language and knowledge of what it means to know something deeply, and finally to also become aware of knowledge patterns.[26]

Recent development

The latest developments in theorising learning to play are the PlayWorld approach,[27] developed in Australia, and Play-Responsive Early Childhood Education and Care (PRECEC), developed in Sweden.[28] Working from the PlayWorld approach, children are introduced to a theme through a fictional story that is dramatized, using props, children and teachers take roles as they enter into the fantasy, where they encounter real-world problems, with a particular focus on STEM knowledge (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). PRECEC is a theory about how teaching – that is, the supporting of learning – in ECE can be responsive to play. Being responsive in the sense of children’s actions being consequential for how activities develop, including, critically, shifts and relationship-building between as is (real-world knowledge) and as

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if (fantasising) is critical to supporting children's learning and development in, of and through play.

Research Gaps, Conclusions and Policy Implications

By tradition, researchers study play or learning, while there is a need for studies of how play and learning relate in a goal-related practice,[29] but also what it means for the child to be in an ECE where children's worlds are appreciated and valued. Countries could consider theirs compared to other curricula and consider how play and learning are talked about and planned for/supported, to potentially develop a new approach that builds on a more play and child-centred communicative approach in early years. Since we know today that the early years are fundamental for the child's future learning, as well as for the development of society,[30] every country should review their curriculum and approaches to ECE with a focus on play.

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