What/Who Is at Work in Children's Play?

Early Childhood Pedagogy Network

In early childhood education, there's a widespread belief that play is an essential part of a good childhood and early childhood education. This idea is so deeply ingrained that it's even recognized as a basic right for children by the United Nations. However, amid this widespread acceptance, and because play is understood as a given component of "good" early childhood education, there's often a lack of focus on the significance of play beyond how it helps children move toward developmental goals. Due to this excessive familiarity with the term play, many educators have not had the chance to delve deeply into understanding the historical, social, and political aspects of play beyond developmental theory. In the article "Play as World Making" (ECPN, 2024), we challenged conventional perspectives on play in early childhood education. We argued that play isn't just about development but is influenced by societal constructs that reflect and perpetuate cultural norms. Emphasizing the role of the ECPN pedagogist, the article advocated for a nuanced understanding of play and its impact on children's worldviews. Building on this argument, in this article we highlight how play understood through developmentalism often reinforces narrow perspectives, and we emphasize the importance of adults' active engagement in play alongside children to foster inclusive learning environments.

What Is at Work in Children's Play?

Much of the understanding of early childhood education stems from developmental psychology, and subsequently, this is how we have come to understand play as it is an integral component of early childhood programs. The obligatory inclusion of play in early childhood spaces has been rationalized as the "best" way in which children learn (Taylor & Boyer, 2020); developmental psychology has instrumentalized play to propel children toward predetermined developmental goals. For example, imaginative play is associated with children developing self-regulation, social competence, and school readiness (Johnson, et al. 2019). However, significant research has troubled developmental psychology for being steeped in dominant discourse derived from white, Eurowestern, male perspectives (Burman, 2016; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Nxumalo, 2015, 2016; Woodhead, 1999). We would like to share some concrete examples from research that illustrate how, within their play, children can be implicated in some of these discourses. These discourses circulate in all types of play, but we have chosen to share examples from children's dramatic play, as in our experience, dramatic play seems especially outside of the realm of adults.

Butler et al. (2019) draw attention to a familiar setup in early childhood classrooms' dramatic play area— cash registers, play money, and items for purchase. While educators typically view this arrangement as a neutral and harmless means to enhance children's social and mathematical development, it simultaneously promotes capitalist ideologies such as consumerism. Through engaging in role-playing scenarios as vendors and consumers, children internalize and reinforce consumerist behaviours and identities.

The dramatic play area found in most early childhood spaces is a rich site for examining the non-innocence of children's play. In addition to creating a consumer, the home corner in early childhood classrooms presents a picturesque ideal of domestic life, with its charming facades and miniature furnishings evoking notions of harmony and innocence (Taylor & Richardson, 2005). However, beneath this idyllic surface lies a reproduction of societal norms, particularly regarding gender roles and family dynamics. In these spaces, children are subtly guided to engage in forms of play that reinforce heteronormative myths of family and domesticity, such as moms caring for children and dads working outside the home, often overlooking the diversity and complexity of real-life experiences.

That non-stereotypical play with dolls is often reprimanded by educators is another example of how gender discourses are reproduced in dramatic play areas (Black Delfin, 2021). Baby dolls are a popular toy for dramatic play. Typically, girls pretend to be the moms, taking

care of the dolls like real babies. But sometimes boys join in, and sometimes they change the story. Instead of caring for the dolls, they might pretend to hurt or even destroy the dolls. This shift away from acting out typical play scenarios shows how children can challenge traditional roles and ideas about gender. They may be testing out different ways of understanding the world around them; however, this kind of play is frequently shifted through educator intervention, with boys being encouraged to move on from their doll play.

Children may also inadvertently reproduce racist discourses through doll play (MacNevin & Berman, 2017). For example, in MacNevin and Berman's (2017) research, two girls favoured white dolls over Black ones, echoing a long-standing preference observed in previous studies. Even though one of the girls had Black family members, she still followed the lead of her peer in valuing white skin. In another episode from the same study, a child assigned a brown-skinned doll the role of a villain, associating its colour with negativity. This demonstrates how children absorb and replicate racial biases even if they don't fully understand the implications. Finally, in a third episode, a child played with Lego figurines that depicted stereotypical Asian features, reinforcing harmful stereotypes without critical discussion from educators. These examples underscore how play is not innocent and highlight how certain prevailing narratives are perpetuated through play.

While we acknowledge the inherent tensions surrounding play in early childhood education, it's important to clarify that we are not negating

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Disrupting the Notion of "Authentic" Free Play

If we understand play as a site where worlds are being created (ECPN, 2024), then play demands the attention and presence of educators. To this end, it's necessary to disrupt the notion that authentic play is free, child centred and void of adult intrusion and direction. As the examples above illustrate, play is shaped by adults' decisions regarding materials, spaces, and the boundaries of acceptable play. Acknowledging that play is always a collaboration between children and adults dispels the myth that authentic play exists independently of adult influence (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

To foster meaningful play experiences that promote children's holistic development, educators must actively co-create play alongside children and go beyond monitoring play for "inappropriate" behaviour (Hedges, 2010). Rather than maintaining a distance from play, educators can foster conditions where adults and children engage in play that's based on shared interests and intentions. By attentively observing children's

play, listening to their inquiries, and exploring alongside them, educators can engage with the complex issues that often arise during play.

When educators actively participate in play with children, they create opportunities for deeper engagement and learning. For instance, when the disappearance of flying insects in early autumn sparks curiosity among children, educators joining in the playful search for these missing insects not only provides opportunities to closely attune to the world but also encourages discussions about the unpredictability of nature and the cyclical changes of the seasons. By actively engaging in these conversations alongside children, educators explore profound concepts such as joy, loss, and the passage of time with the children. This educator/child playful experience creates conditions for children and educators to co-make meaning about the world, which would not have been possible if educators remained passive observers outside of children's play.

Nurturing a Playful Disposition

Play Today: A Handbook for Educators (Government of BC, 2019) invites early childhood educators to consider their own memories of play and consider what play memories they hope to nurture in the children in their early childhood classrooms,

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which reminds us that play is not something to take for granted within early childhood spaces, but rather something that educators need to pay close attention to and actively engage with. *Play Today* also puts forward, importantly, that educators are always engaged with children's play in some form (Government of BC, 2019). What happens when we embrace the educator's role to "co-construct lively curriculum with children, materials, place, and each other as they intentionally experiment with pedagogies" (ECEBC, 2022)?

Moving from the role of facilitator or supervisor of play to the role of co-player, where we spend time playing and thinking with children in their play, allows us to hear and respond to what is emerging from play events. As co-playing educators, we have opportunities to cultivate subjectivities necessary for negotiation, problem-solving, and ethical decision-making that are part of figuring out how to play well with others. For example, challenges that emerge as children negotiate the script of a quest they are undertaking in response to a map drawn by another child can create the space to think collectively about how to respond to the complex and interesting adventures inherent in quests that are often filled with unknown creatures, twists, and turns. As a co-player, educators might demonstrate genuine interest and excitement in the adventure, inviting children to immerse themselves in the quest as maps are drawn and revised, characters are created that require new relationships to be formed, and the plot is discussed and rewritten as the story of the children's quest develops into a rich narrative.

Arguably, to co-create play with children and engage in play as co-players, we as adult educators need to nurture a playful disposition *within ourselves.* "What if early childhood education is not merely a job but an art of teaching" (Vincent-Snow & Tong, 2019, p. 8) and integral to that art is a serious playful engagement with the children they work with? If playfulness is understood as a vital disposition for children to make meaning of their world, might it not also be an important disposition for adults? "Playfulness creates a shared space for both adults and children" (Vincent-Snow & Tong, 2019, p. 11), a space where curriculum is co-constructed as a living inquiry. Bringing our own playful approaches, imaginaries, and that which we find joyful into the collective life of the early childhood program enriches children's engagements and can support our own enjoyment, learning, and connections as educators.

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The Early Childhood Pedagogy Network (ECPN) mobilizes the call for transformational change in early childhood education in British Columbia. In collaboration with communities, the ECPN is committed to creating conditions for pedagogical leadership through the pedagogist role. The ECPN extends and formalizes the work of the Investigating Quality (IQ) and Pedagogical Facilitator projects.

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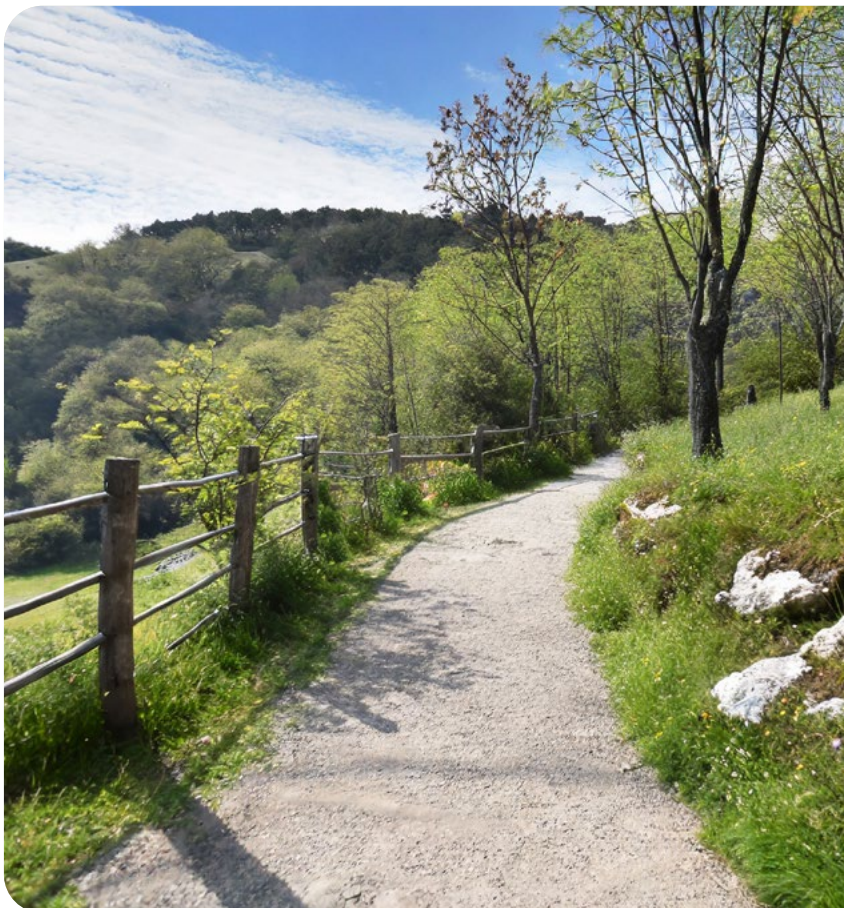
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If you know an ECE who is retiring or has recently passed away, please let us know. We would like to recognize and honour them in the journal.

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