

Special Issue: (Re)positioning Play and Playful Learning in Early
Childhood Education and Care

Guest Editor's INTRODUCTION

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Play has long been regarded as a common discourse in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Play is significant during the early years. In fact, play is a fundamental child's right, regardless of age, gender, culture, social class, or [dis]ability. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international human rights treaty that aims to protect the rights of every child worldwide. Specifically, the UN Convention Article 31 proclaims to protect the fundamental right of children to play (United Nations, 1989).

Article 31

That every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

It is critical to recognize the importance of play in the lives of children and promote their right to play. Play is vital to children's development and well-being, and it should not be regarded as a luxury in children's lives. Strong evidence has consistently shown that play creates a powerful medium for learning and fostering cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Elkind, 2008; Hirsch-Pasek et al.,

2009).

Many scholars agree that play is child-initiated, freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, flexible, enjoyable, actively engaging, meaningful, and socially interactive (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Gray, 2013; Johnson et al., 2019; Zosh et al., 2017). Playfulness, the ‘quintessence’ or the spirit of play, promotes joy, excitement, and creativity in young children and develops their problem-solving skills (Lieberman, 1977; Sicart, 2014; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play and playfulness combined fundamentally would affect the human experience and learning (Nørgård et al., 2017; Whitton, 2018). Thus, play-based learning is a meaningful and “necessary component for a more holistic concept of learning” (Greve, 2013, p. 1).

Play, however, is in danger of disappearing. Many scholars are concerned that children’s free play is declining at an alarming rate. A child’s right to play is endangered by a heavy focus on accountability and standards-based curricula, resulting in more structured, academically rigorous tasks and direct instruction (Gray, 2013; Jung & Jin, 2014; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Pistorova & Ruslan, 2017). Self-directed play is vital to human health (Elkind, 2008), but it has been compromised, denied, overlooked, and increasingly replaced by more structured or adult-directed educational activities (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Gray, 2013; Murray, 2018).

Despite a critical need to learn about play and practice play pedagogy in teacher education programs, preservice teachers tend to learn about the theoretical concept of play and primarily focus on ways to create a playful environment for young children (Loizou, 2017). The industrialization of and the prevalent neoliberalism in higher education favors measurable learning outcomes and assessment-driven environments, limiting play and playful learning among adults in higher education (Canaslan-Akyar & Sevimli-Celik, 2021; Leather et al., 2021; McArdle et al., 2019). Therefore, there is an urgent need for early childhood professionals to learn about and enact play pedagogy, experience playful learning, integrate intentionally designed play-based curriculum to support young children’s learning and development, and ultimately become advocates of play.

The five articles presented in this special issue provide a forum for researchers, scholars, and practitioners to reflect on the importance of play for young children. The authors share their work and provide insights regarding ways to improve, promote, and (re)position play for young children, educators, and families. With great enthusiasm and appreciation, I

provide the following summary of the five articles.

In the first article, “*Student Teachers’ Reflections on the Use of Drama in Education to Motivate Young Children’s Science Play*,” Ya-Ling Chen and Lee-Feng Huang explore the transdisciplinary pedagogies that incorporate drama in education (DIE) strategies to stimulate children’s interest in science play in Southern Taiwan. Using multiple data sources that include observations, interviews, student questionnaires as well as document collection, the authors examine the work of student teachers who were enrolled in a course titled “Creative science activity design for young children” as part of a teacher development program. Specifically, Chen and Huang explore how the student teachers incorporate and consider DIE strategies as they design and implement science activities for preschool children aged four to six years old. The findings reveal that the student teachers utilized various DIE strategies to engage children in science play, such as warm-up, improvisation, and story role-playing. Chen and Huang explain how the use of DIE strategies stimulates children’s interests, facilitates active engagement in science activities, and improves students’ understanding of scientific concepts. The authors discuss several key concepts and challenges regarding the use of DIE strategies in science play and provide implications for science play in ECEC.

Second, Heejin Kim and Gawon Lee investigate how the rules and restrictions that teachers impose on children’s free play affect the quantity and quality of pretend play in Korea. In this paper, “*The Effects of Teacher’s Restriction of Children’s Free Play on Children’s Pretend Play*,” they focused on four teachers. Two of the teachers restrict play with a high degree of limitation and the other two teachers are permissive with a low degree of limitation. The authors examine the class rules that restrict children’s free play, such as ‘the number of children that can play in one interest area,’ ‘the use of toys only for specified purposes,’ ‘preventing play by mixing toys from different interest areas,’ ‘moving toys in one interest area to another,’ ‘moving from one interest area to another without finishing the play,’ and ‘the time given to children for free play.’ The descriptive statistical analysis of the observation data indicates that children in the permissive classroom engaged in pretend play frequently, demonstrated higher-level topics of pretend play, and played in more diverse areas of interest than the children under the care of the more restrictive teachers. Kim and Lee argue that it is important to provide young children with an environment that facilitates free play because rules that teachers impose on children’s free play can hinder their ability to

interact with peers of their choice and expand or transform their play.

In the third article, “*Korean Early Childhood Teachers’ Perceptions of the Importance and Performance of the “Play Environment,”*” Bora Kang, Hong-Ju Jun, and Seenyoung Park examine the perceptions of early childhood teachers regarding the importance and performance of the play environment in Korea. Creating a high-quality educational environment is essential in early childhood settings. Utilizing importance-performance analysis to online questionnaire data, the authors analyze the factors that need improvement to provide the high-quality play environment in early childhood education. Kang, Jun, and Park consider four aspects of the play environment, including ‘environment giving comfort,’ ‘environment supporting child-initiated learning,’ ‘environment fostering aesthetic sensitivity,’ and ‘environment fostering creativity.’ The authors conclude that the importance of the play environment is statistically significant and higher than performance across all aspects. Also, the study reveals that the areas that needed intensive improvement included ‘environment supporting child-initiated learning’ and ‘environment fostering aesthetic sensitivity.’ The authors articulate specific areas and items that need improvements to facilitate children’s active participation in play and enrich the play environment. Kang, Jun, and Park offer valuable recommendations in creating effective play environments in early childhood settings.

The next article describes Siu and Keung’s work in interviewing parents to investigate how they define and value play in Hong Kong. Angela Siu and Chrysa Keung explain that it is critical to understand parents’ perceptions of children’s play in their study, “*Perceptions among Hong Kong Parents on Play in Early Childhood: A Qualitative Study.*” The authors describe that parents from different cultural contexts perceive play differently and their involvement has a positive effect on children’s social, emotional, and academic growth. Qualitative analysis of interview data revealed that forty parents who participated in this study had a diverse understanding of play and recognized play in many forms. While some parents valued the concept of a child-centered approach respecting the child’s individual needs, interests, and intrinsic motivation to play, many participating parents exhibited an education-oriented approach, inclining them to pursue explicit early learning goals for their children. The authors highlight a growing parental diverse perception of play as a multi-dimensional concept valuable for whole child development in Hong Kong.

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In the final article, “*COVID-19 Pandemic, Mental Health, and Play for Young Children during and after Pandemic*,” Eunhye Bae and Soyoun Bae conduct an extensive literature review and provide a comprehensive narrative explanation of the effects of COVID-19 on children’s learning, development, and well-being. Furthermore, the authors recognize the vulnerability of young children during the COVID-19 crisis and argue there is a crucial need to support their social-emotional, and mental health. In considering ways to mitigate the adverse consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on young children’s sound development, Bae and Bae examine the value of play during and after the pandemic and articulate the importance of valuing expressive functions of play, implementing play-based curriculum, and facilitating transdisciplinary collaborations among professionals in various fields. There is a lack of data regarding the impact of the pandemic on children’s overall growth and well-being, and that the pandemic is persistent and evolving through phases. Consequently, the authors offer meaningful suggestions and insights for early childhood education.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue significantly contribute to our work in the field of early childhood education and care. Each of these articles addresses various ideas and aspects of play and pedagogy, and the insights and inspiration presented here reflect the efforts of early childhood educators who are trying to enhance our understanding of play and play pedagogy. I hope that this special issue will stimulate and renew scholarly interest regarding play among young children in the Asia-Pacific region and other areas and empower us all to advocate for the importance of play.

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