

# *Introduction*

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## **Play in the 21st Century**

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Is *play at risk* in the 21st century? Much has been written on the potential for children’s play to be usurped by more rigorous academics in early childhood curricula, the growing trend of commercialization of childcare and education (Gillian-Mauffette, 2009; Hill, 2011; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Trawick-Smith, 2012), and schoolification initiatives that focus on readiness (Alock & Haggerty, 2013). This discourse prioritizes play as a means to an end (instrumentalization), suggesting that play-based early childhood education programs lead to better learning and developmental outcomes (Bouchard, et al., 2014). Theoretical research posits that play is a valuable medium that fosters cognitive (Piaget, 1929) and developmental growth (Erikson, 1955; Montessori, 1897; Vygotsky, 1938). Much of the literature also conflates play with early learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Dewey, 1938; Elkind, 2001). This instrumentalization of children’s play has been criticized for contributing to a dichotomy between play that is encouraged and viewed as beneficial, and play that is considered illicit or inappropriate in educational settings (Edmiston, 2008; Hartmann & Brougère, 2004; Sturzbecher, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Largely absent

from the discourse are discussions focused on the relationship between spirituality, materialism, enjoyment, and play.

Instrumentalization of play is also evident within the public health literature, where certain types of play are linked to combating obesity, thereby narrowing possibilities for children's play (Frolich, Alexander & Fusco, 2012). Along with a characterization of children 'glued' to screens instead of climbing trees as a cause of the increase in childhood obesity (Epstein et al., 2008; Louv, 2008; Rowan, 2010; Sijtsma, Koller, Sauer, & Corpeleijn, 2015), there is also a sense of crisis: children are not playing enough, or in the right way! And it is our job, as parents, educators, and academics, to solve this crisis for the good of society and every child's future.

### ***Defending Play***

Play is included in the UN Declaration of children's rights (Jones, Hodson & Hapier, 2005; Juster & Leichter-Saxby, 2014; Lester & Russell, 2014; UNICEF) and has long been rooted to the theory that supports healthy human development. Early theorists have conceptualized play as therapeutic (Freud, 1920), a rehearsal for life (Bruner, 1972), preparation for learning (Dewey, 1932), a sensory experience (Montessori, 1897), a contributor to a child's intellectual (Piaget, 1929) and social development (Vygotsky, 1929); and a form of meta-communication (Erikson, 1955). And despite some of the rhetoric, recent empirical studies have found that children's play is not in decline (Willett et al., 2013; Lehrer, Petrakos & Venkatesh, 2014). Moreover, what is the definition of play in the 21st century? How should play be conceptualized? Those involved in early childhood learning are wondering, "how did we get to this place, where we have to play?". Lester and Russell (2010) call for research that brings a deeper understanding of the role of play in children's actual lives.

### ***Thinking Play Differently***

The Canadian Association for Research in Early Childhood proposed a special section on Thinking Play Differently, in order to challenge the taken-for granted assumptions regarding play and early education, and to illuminate the complexity of play within children's lives and learning environments. The special capsule issue brings together various disciplinary perspectives in both English and French, and aims to further the critical dialogue on the role of play in young children's lives. As guest editors, we posed several

questions, such as how play is positioned, what types of play are encouraged or prohibited within early childhood education, and what are the ways in which some notions of play are granted power and privilege. This selection of papers includes a variety of empirical and theoretical work related to young children's play in educational settings.

First, Stagg Peterson and colleagues present the notion that despite the firmly rooted theoretical and practical history that play has in the lives of humans (children and parents alike), Canadian teachers and parents are asking questions about whether play should be part of kindergarten. The authors critically examine how play is explicitly and implicitly represented in curricula across five Canadian provinces: Alberta, Ontario, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, analyzing references to play in current and historical curricula in an effort to trace changing assumptions about play and its role in kindergarten classrooms. They also illuminate a rising and concerning discourse of *purposeful* play and the role of power within that dialogue.

Hewes and her colleagues take up notions of power and the instrumentalization of play as they explore a group of children using texts from Disney's popular animated movie *Frozen* as the inspiration for their play, and the educators' complex and thoughtful reactions. This article reveals the potential for play to be "as a thing in itself" when it is emergent and viewed from the perspective that play is just play (Huizinga, 1950) as the adults attempt to privilege children's meaning making over their own intentions. These authors emphasize the power of traditions and storytelling with provocations for creating learning opportunities, place, and space for creating cultural capacity and place for our own First Nations stories in Canada. This article is also a beautiful example of emergent curriculum and taking popular culture play to a deeper level, which promotes knowledge mobilization for both for undergraduate students or practitioners in the field of education.

Weibe and his fellow poets/authors, in the third piece in this special capsule issue, take us on a poetic inquiry about whether play is at risk in the 21st century through their own poetic response to the call for papers. They share their experiences and how this call for papers inspired them to create and play both together and for readers. This piece demonstrates the potential that invitations and provocations (Epstein, 2007) can create. It also challenges the loss of play across the lifespan, advocating that this does not and should not be the case if play is a human right.

Finally, Lebrun-Niesing and Marinova, in their article titled, *Le jeu caché en classe comme espace transitionnel à la maternelle* [Hidden play as a transitional space

in kindergarten] explore how children find ways to play at school, even during periods when free play is prohibited. Although the study was conducted in France, the three types of hidden play they observed, gearing-play, acting-as-if, and finding-creating; the idea that children use play as a tactic to support their own transition to school; as well as the authors' assertions that young children's play should be considered a right, seem particularly applicable to Kindergarten in Canada. In addition, the consideration of children's point of view when it comes to resisting the imposed curriculum or daily routine through play, adds another example of thinking differently about children's play.

### ***Book Reviews***

In addition, three book reviews pertinent to the theme complete the special issue. Amy E. Dickerson provides a review for Miguel Sicart's *Play Matters* uncovering biases toward play, and emphasizing the people, places, roles, tools, acts, and attitudes which are involved in play. She provides a laser sharp interpretation of Sicart's humanistic discussion about play as one where "play gives us the world, and through play we make the world ours" (p.101) and how play is important for all humans.

Alison Wells-Dyck offers a review of Carol Archer and Iram Siraj's *Encouraging Physical Development Through Movement Play*, articulating the way the authors present (she notes albeit dated) neuroscience research relevant to movement play and advocating movement play as essential at home and in early childhood settings. She also offers suggestions for updated research that could enhance the authors' work as well as critique about free-flow play that she deems idealistic and impractical given Canadian regulations and climate.

Thomas Rajotte reviews another book on physical development, Johanne April and Anik Charron's *L'activité psychomotrice au préscolaire : Des activités nécessaires pour soutenir le développement global de l'enfant* [Psychomotor activity in preschool: Activities necessary for supporting children's global development]. He explains how this book, which combines theory and practical activities, is useful and accessible for Kindergarten teachers, but suggests that activities targeting more than one of the seven components of psychomotor development would make it even better.

***Concluding Thoughts: The Gift of Play***

We are thrilled with the renewed conversations about play and the important contributions the authors in this special capsule issue bring to the fore through the fascinating scope of their research and writing about play. We wanted to challenge notions of play, encourage readers to rethink and re-examine play in the 21st century, and to deepen our collective understanding and curiosity about the role of play in children's lives

In an effort to avoid concluding, we hope readers will be inspired to think differently about play in the lives of the children. We hope this small but mighty capsule on play will spark both new and renewed discourse around taken for granted notions of play in the 21st century. This is an opportunity to think differently about play and to revitalize play as a thriving (as opposed to endangered) component of human lives, beginning (but not ending) in the early years. By playing and exploring new ideas, and being playful ourselves with these writings, we also embodied the investigations of what the gift of play can provide for all of us.