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### Promoting play for a better future

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## EDITORIAL

### Promoting play for a better future

The proliferation of the number of studies on play in the past decade is remarkable and an interesting cultural phenomenon by itself. For anthropologists, developmental psychologists and educationalists ‘play’ has been one of the topics on their research agenda for a long time, and, in fact, educationalists are now increasingly interested in studying play for educational purposes. Why? What’s going on?

Obviously, in addition to anthropology, psychology and pedagogy, today play is a subject of interest and concern for many disciplines, like sociology, philosophy, cultural studies and childhood studies. The importance of play for children’s learning, development and well-being is now broadly acknowledged, and this acknowledgement is clearly reflected in the outpouring of books and other publications on play and playful learning in the past decade. The various benefits of play for children are beyond doubt, which is supported by an increasing number of empirical studies.

Seeing this tendency as a cultural phenomenon, especially in the industrialised world, immediately raises further questions about the reasons for this growth of attention. Is it a reaction to a dreading ‘disappearance of childhood’ (Postman 1994), or is it a consequence of the process of de-traditionalisation (Ziehe 2009) that gives children and youngsters more freedom to act to their own accord? Or is it a sign of taking seriously and respecting children’s right to play and express their views through play? Or is it an expression of the eternal urge of the human being for self-realisation and – hence – a counter-reaction to de-humanising effects of industrialised and over-regulated societies on culture and human development (e.g. Huizinga 1935, see also Singer, this issue, pp. 172–184)?

Despite these positive circumstances, there are as yet still good reasons for concern with regard to children’s opportunities to play in the modern industrialised society. Recent changes in society and cultural life, driven by the ambitions of an upcoming knowledge society, increasingly emphasise effective teaching for the acquisition of knowledge and skills, as well as stressing accountability in educational matters. And this trend seems to expand to younger (preschool) children as well. This tendency in society is interpreted by many educationalists and developmental psychologists as inconsistent with play, and it often results in a reduction or even marginalisation of play in (early years) educational settings (e.g. Nicolopoulou 2010). And actually nobody really knows the extent of the psychological, social and economic consequences of this marginalisation of playing in the pre-primary and primary school for the future of individuals, the evolution of scientific thinking and art, social life and society as a whole.

Most likely, it is a combination of different factors, and varying individual reasons that rouses the concern about our collective and individual future, and especially about how to optimise conditions for positive developments in human beings as agents in a diversifying cultural environment. At a political level there is currently serious awareness of the essential importance of education, and especially the need for high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is emphasised by many politicians as a vital condition for the maintenance of culture and the improvement of the living conditions of all people. According to the UNESCO definition, there is no room for

misunderstanding the utmost importance of good education and care for young children: ‘ECCE [Early Childhood Care and Education] supports children’s survival, growth, development, and learning – including health, nutrition, and hygiene, verbal and cognitive, social, social physical, aesthetic and emotional development – from birth to primary school in formal, informal and non-formal settings’ (Unesco 2006, 3). This UNESCO definition of ECCE emphasises that high quality early childhood education should not only concentrate on economic outcomes and the strengthening of the future workforce through the transition of foundational cultural knowledge, abilities and attitudes, but should also focus on social outcomes (in the sense of conviviality and social cohesion) and democratic outcomes, such as joint responsibility, democratic values, equality, and human dignity (see also Bennet 2010).

No doubt, these high ambitions with ECCE immediately also raise questions of approach: how to achieve these aims? As suggested above, play seems to be a valuable medium for children to participate in cultural life, to learn how to live together, to learn how to deal with authority, conflicts and power, and to appropriate basic cultural values, attitudes, abilities and knowledge. Notwithstanding the successes of play for the achievement of these cultural and educational aims (as reported in recent research, see for example Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2009), there is also reason for concern whether our present understandings of play as a medium for interaction and learning, will be sufficient for the establishment of optimal conditions for learning and development, in order to maximise young children’s abilities to take part autonomously in future society. How should we improve our understanding of play in order to assist teachers and caretakers with helping children to be better prepared for intellectual and moral autonomy in their future lives and in society?

This special issue is an attempt to contribute modestly to the above mentioned ambitions, and to bring together a number of articles that explore new ideas, conceptualisations and arguments in play theory and research. For this issue, the editors looked for authors who are exploring new dimensions of play that can deepen, broaden, and maybe even change our understanding of play to such an extent that innovative approaches in research and practice may be expected for the benefit of a sound development of children. Given the current state of the art, we believe that both theoretical and empirical studies are needed to advance our understanding of play.

After a quick survey of trends in modern culture in industrialised societies, the editors believe as for now that future play research may be necessary on the following topics at least:

### ***Digital games and toys***

Children live in a digital world and to an increasing extent encounter toys and media that are based on the digitisation of our society. There is a growing need for knowledge about how this may change the social representation of play, and influence children’s cognitive, social, affective and motor development. Similarly, we wonder how (if at all) (interactive) digital tools and games may influence young children’s conceptions of play, information gathering and learning, especially how it reorganises learning of language, math, biology or any other (academic) content.

### ***Play and neurodynamics***

What do we already know about possible effects of play or special play forms (e.g. play materials, play environments, different games) on children’s brain functioning, both on

a hormonal level and on the neurodynamic level? Is there an effect on, for instance, the development of executive functions, functioning of the limbic system or the development of the tactile, kinaesthetic and vestibular systems? Innovative neuropsychological and neurobiological research may produce new, valuable insights into play, brain development, hormonal regulation (e.g. cortisol level), and physical well-being and experiences of the child.

### ***Changing role of the adult in play of young children***

The nature of children's play changes when they grow older (in the trajectory from 0- to 8-years-old). What does it mean for the adult's behaviour with respect to playing with children of different ages? Are there new arguments and innovative insights into the changing role of adults in children's play; should we differentiate in the nature of the adult's participation in play between the stages and social situations of child development: from baby until the early school years?

### ***Play and the arts as narratives***

What is the role of narrative in relation to play? What are the developmental potentials of play organised as evolving narrative? Can play stimulate children's creative and artistic development in different dimensions such as painting, sculpture, music and dance? If yes, what seem to be good practices to achieve this goal? Further research is needed on educational practices that are based on new insights into learning by play and the role of the arts in young children's lives, for instance insights into narrative learning and developmental education.

### ***Cultural diversity and play***

Deeper understanding is needed of play as a historical and cultural phenomenon rooted in cultural beliefs and practices. Insights that, for instance, might give us a better understanding of the home upbringing of migrant children in Western cultures, and of the potentially disadvantageous biases of our Western beliefs in play and early learning. It is important to better understand how cultural beliefs about play, and the role of adults in play, influence children's well-being and learning, and how playful activity can be employed as a context for meaningful (spontaneous or explicit) learning for children.

The editors do not consider this a limitative list of topics, nor expect that each topic could be covered in the special issue. Nevertheless a number of the above mentioned research priorities will be addressed in this issue. Taken together, the articles collected here can be read as parts of one of the current narratives about the state of affairs in play research and theorising. The reconstruction of the message of this special issue may be described as follows:

One of the mind-boggling issues in play research for a long time is the definition and operationalisation of play itself. In her article *Play and Playfulness, Basic Features of Early Childhood Education*, Elly Singer argues that play and playfulness are basic features of the education and care of the children younger than four years of age. Drawing on the work 'Homo Ludens' (The playing human) of the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, Singer argues that play is one of the sources of culture and that human enculturation essentially is based on play. The essential features of play are pleasure in the player and a sense of freedom. Furthermore she points out that rules, rhythm and structure are binding dimensions of play, but should never be so strict as to spoil the child's pleasure and sense of freedom. Similar reasoning regards the participation of the

adult in children's play. Children and adult co-construct a shared world that is pleasurable for children to play in. If the educational benefits become too dominant in a shared activity, according to Singer, the child's pleasure may be lost and the playful nature of the activity spoiled.

Another attempt at conceptualising play is presented in the article *Is it Play?*, by Bert van Oers. He constructs a theory of play as a further elaboration of the cultural–historical approach of Vygotskij, Leont'ev and El'konin. Van Oers construes the notion of play as a specific mode of (cultural) activities that is characterised by high involvement, acknowledgement of rules by the player, and permission of some degrees of freedom to the player in the interpretation of action affordances, in the choice and use of tools, rules, goals, etc. Van Oers demonstrates this Cultural–Historical Activity Theory of play especially by references to role play and claims that this theory provides explanations of playful learning, the evolution of playing after the early years and clarifies the role of the adult (if any) in play.

There is an enormous variety of play, depending on time and culture. To a great extent this variety is a consequence of the adult-created world that provides children with the materials, opportunities, examples of activities, and tools or toys. For the understanding of changes in play over time, it is important to scrutinise the role of adults and the type of toys that are made available. Susan Edwards argues in her article *The Problem of Digital Play: Towards a Contextual Response* for a contextual interpretation of the meaning of play, which implies understanding and evaluating play on the basis of its value for children's actual life and consumerist rights, but also on the basis of the action potencies digital tools open for new activities and play. Hence, the introduction of digital tools and toys are not to be evaluated in comparison with old toys: such comparisons often devalue digital toys as being too individualistic, uncreative and not eliciting varied motor actions. She claims that digital play 'needs to be understood more broadly in cultural terms in relation to how technologies mediate children's connections to contemporary society'. The introduction of digital tools creates new types of play with their new developmental opportunities and needs that have to be evaluated in their own right, not necessarily as a decline in quality compared to familiar toys.

Obviously, the decision to allow children to play with (digital) tools is often based on adult decisions. All authors in this special issue agree that the role of the adult cannot be evaluated pejoratively by default. But, all authors also agree that adult participation in children's play is not always beneficial either. Adults (teachers and caregivers) need to learn how to participate in young children's play. Most of the articles in the present special issue address this problem from varying points of view, though referring to different age levels.

In their article, *Adult Play Guidance and Children's Play Development in Narrative Play-world*, Pentti Hakkarainen and his colleagues demonstrate some of the positive and negative conditions for a valuable participation of adults in children's play. They summarise part of their experiences with young adults' (teacher trainees') abilities to participate in young children's (one- to six-years-old) play. Starting out from the theories of Vygotskij and El'konin, these authors attribute an important role to adults in promoting children's development in play. In their work with teacher trainees they discovered, however, that many of them need to learn how to play with children, how to participate in children's role play and narratives. In their qualitative studies of different teacher–child interactions they found that teachers can promote children's development in play by relating to the children's zone of proximal development, by endorsing

children's emotional relationship with the actions and roles they are playing (pereživanie'), and by keeping track of the narrative bound intentions of the children themselves.

Another example of productive participation of teachers in young children's play (six-years-old), is described by Mizrap Bulunuz in his article *Science Teaching Through Play in Kindergarten: Does Integrated Play and Science Instruction Build Understanding?* In the playful engagement of children in science activities (experimenting, hypothesising, and reflecting, regarding for example, 'gravity') children were exploring and talking with each other and the teacher on problems concerning gravity. By questioning, the teachers encouraged the children to make predictions on outcomes, and discuss notions and solutions with each other. Comparing the results of this playful approach to science and direct instructions of the same concepts showed that the playful development of scientific notions gives better results than direct teaching. The type of teacher talk in Bulunuz's research comes close to the play-embedded talk that was described elsewhere in this special issue by Meacham (see below). It is worthwhile to stress here that teachers' talk for enhancing learning in play, according to Bulunuz, should meet specific demands, like allowing the use of personal experiences, the use of repetitions and variations, and stimulating meta-cognition.

In her article, *Preschool Teachers' Language Use During Dramatic Play*, Sohyun Meacham reports a study of teachers' language use in the context of dramatic play with young pupils (about seven-years-old) in three different Head Start centres in the USA. She discovered that teachers can apply different strategies in their verbal participation in children's dramatic play. The results favour the conclusion that play-embedded instructional talk is much more productive in promoting language development in children in the context of their play, than explicit instructional talk, play language coaching, or play administrative talk. It turned out, moreover, that the frequency of child talk is relatively higher when play-embedded talk is used, providing the teacher with more opportunities to evaluate, support and extend children's talk.

Adult participation in young children's play, however, doesn't always play itself out positively, especially when the participating adults don't meet the basic demands of children's play (like pleasure, children's sense of freedom, compliance with children's intentions and fantasies, etc.). Karen McInnes addresses children's perceptions of play in her article *The Nature of Adult-Child Interaction in the Early Years Classroom: Implications for Children's Perceptions of Play and Subsequent Learning Behaviour* and demonstrates that an adult's previous ways of participating in children's play can have significant impact on how children identify activities as play or not. McInnes' research suggests that issues of choice and control communicated in open questions, as well as exchanges that are based upon mutual understanding and shared control might be crucial in how children evaluate adult-child interactions. She proposes that this open-questioning style of interaction must be developed in teachers in order to co-construct a play-based curriculum, and enhance playful learning. The type of interactions employed by Meacham (this issue, see summary above) in his playful science learning seems consistent with McInnes' open-questioning style to enhance playful learning. If adults in general don't meet these requirements, children tend to see activities in which adults are involved as non-play.

Mike Wragg also concentrates on potential harmful consequences of adult participation in children's play in his article *Towards an Inversion of the Deficit Model of Intervention in Children's Play*. He argues that adults, despite good pedagogic intentions, sometimes restrict young children's fields of activity in their attempts to

develop and protect children against dangers, on the basis of their own and self-attributed limitations and inabilities. Assuming that children lack the required skills for the activities they engage themselves in (like climbing trees), adults tend to prevent children from undertaking these actions. Such restrictive interactions with children fail to appreciate the child's innate abilities to act cautiously and thus may seriously limit the full flourishing of children. Wragg argues for the ridding of the deficit model that restrict the child's arena for activity and replace it with interactions based on trust in the child's biological potentials. Sometimes children do not need adult interference in exploring their (physical) world.

Despite the possibly positive consequences of well-organised adult-child interactions (as described above), we should never close our eyes for mutual contributions to development among peers. In their article *Perceiving Change in Role Play*, Jyrki Reunamo and colleagues have conducted a large-scale comparative study on role play in Finland and Taiwan. They witnessed that rich role-play with peers most frequently occurred in situations where no adult was present. In their peer-interactive role-play, children can change situations and introduce new content to their own accord. By participation in role play children can experience that they can be responsible for changes in their world. As such 'role play is a good opportunity to perceive and practice these changes in an environment that they themselves have participated in producing with their creative ideas'. Nevertheless, caretakers might still be needed to stimulate role play in young children (especially under-fives, less popular and disadvantaged children) by involving them in joint role play and modelling new ways to play.

Finally, tipping the balance of the special issue, we can conclude that much theoretical and empirical work, in particular by means of cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, historical and multi-method approaches, is still to be done in order to engage children in play in educational institutions with maximal benefits for themselves and future society. In supplement to the previously described list of research priorities we can now add new topics to the research agenda on the basis of our experiences with the present submissions. First, more research is needed to find out and empirically confirm which demands must be put on the adults' participation in children's play. Consequently, more research is also needed on how to educate adults in learning to play with children and giving them the necessary spaces to explore, reflect, communicate and without impairment of the children's pleasure and relative freedom to play with peers without adult involvement. Second, many (but not all) articles in the special issue focused on children in role play. More research is needed on how previous stages of play (peek-a-boo, playing around, rough-and-tumble), object manipulation and exploration, early pretend play) in 0- to three-year-olds can enhance children's social, emotional, cognitive and language development. How do the demands on adult participation in these kinds of play differ from participation in older children's role play?

During our work on this special issue we became more and more convinced of the urgency of critical cultural and historical reflection on the role of play in young children's life in our highly industrialised world. Several contradictory social developments are deeply influencing young children's, and their parents', lives. Because of the working conditions of the parents young children enter into child care institutions from a very young age. The institutionalisation of early childhood can both endanger young children's right to play because of rigid routines, and enrich their play because they meet peers and playful teachers. There is a tendency to speed up.

Parents suffer from a lack of time and teachers feel overburdened. Children's development is speeded up by starting formal education at an earlier age to counterbalance the growing number of years of schooling that are needed to prepare youngsters for jobs in a knowledge society. But there is also a tendency to enforce a playful attitude, both in children and adult. The rise of the digital world of games and the abundance of information via the World Wide Web call for a new style of playful learning by trial and error instead of following manuals and the advices of the experts. Rapid changes in our society ask for a playful attitude to interpret changes as challenges, as opportunities for winning and losing. Moreover children and adults show a large need of physical, social and artistic play to compensate for the stress that is related to economical and philosophical insecurity of modern life. Play has the strength to foster togetherness in young children's, and their caretakers', lives (Hännikäinen 2007). But we want to take a step further: play is crucial for togetherness in our communities and for bridging over contradictions in our culture. To clarify the importance of play we need to rethink our basic values and the educational goals of our time. Promoting play is essential for a good life and a better future.

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