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# Play as World Making

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Early Childhood Pedagogy Network

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**P**edagogists in the BC Early Childhood Pedagogy Network (ECPN) engage daily with early childhood educators in conversations about play. These conversations often begin with statements related to the significance of play in children's developmental trajectories. For instance, the conversation could focus on how to create spaces for supporting the continuum of play-based learning or how much time children should be allowed to play in the classroom. The assumption behind these conversations is always that the educator's role is to be a facilitator or provocateur of play—someone who provides children with props, resources, or time to play.

Yet, educators often experience that pedagogists move the conversation beyond these assumptions and focus instead on the intentions, values, and beliefs inherent in the play. In this article, we argue that play has a much more important role than facilitating children's developmental trajectories. We think of play as a world-making event.

## **Play as a Societal and Historical Construct**

Pedagogists recognize that play is a societal and historical construct. Thus, the meaning of play evolves and shifts within and across contexts. This recognition of play as a construct challenges the idea that play is a natural part of childhood that offers young children a secure

pathway to a successful developmental outcome. Instead, pedagogists think of play as a mode through which children become citizens of the world (Kinard et al., 2021). Through play, children try out modes of being in the world. For instance, they might enact what it is like to be a kitten cared for by a mother cat. But this enactment is never neutral. To explain this process, Michelle Beissel Heath (2019) writes that play has been “deployed ... in attempts to create ideal citizens—though what those ideals were varied greatly and were dependent on factors such as gender, ethnicity, colonial status, and class” (p. i).

Sometimes children's play maintains problematic understandings of what it means to be a child, mother, father, sister, or brother. Returning to the scenario of the kitten and the mother cat, the way in which the children play out their roles might perpetuate gender stereotypes that position girls as primary caregivers and exclude boys from the possibility of taking up this role. Therefore, a pedagogist might invite the educators to pay close attention to what the play is enacting so that educators can enter the play as a pedagogical event, that is in a way that disrupts heteronormative values. In doing so, educators can create opportunities for other ways of being a kitten and/or a mother.

At other times, children may play out ways of being in the world that open spaces for alternative ways of being. In those moments, the

pedagogist might invite the educators to attend carefully so that they can nurture conditions for the values and beliefs inherent in the play event. For example, the children might begin to play out weddings in response to events happening in their lives, on social media, or in the centre. As the children create a venue for weddings to be enacted in the classroom, various combinations of partners are married and celebrated. The children's weddings also highlight different cultural wedding rituals. The educators and the children can then engage in deep conversations around wedding rituals in ways that support children's thinking, for instance, about how the concept of rituals creates multiple communities and families.

Let's think about board games that we might play with children. Monopoly or online games, such as *Lego My City 2*, invite children into a pretend role that asks them to take up the values and beliefs of capitalism. We can also consider which players are asked into play when children build their own empires online in the game *Forge of Empires*. It is important to note that we are not demonizing or even critiquing these games but recognizing how play itself creates a player that takes up values and beliefs that are important to the status quo. The house corner in many early childhood centres includes play materials, dress-up clothes and so forth to invite pretend play. However, it might also reinscribe gendered roles

that reflect the values and beliefs of heteronormativity. Beissel Heath (2018), who has done a historical analysis of play, writes that the stuff of play (e.g., the materials, narratives, games) emulates what it means to be a citizen in a particular culture (p. 7). Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007), in her analysis of the cable network Nickelodeon, takes this line of thought further by asserting that “commercial media play a pivotal role in creating cultural definitions about what it means to be a citizen” (p. 7).

### Play in Early Childhood Education Spaces

We are not suggesting that children should not play. Children do play, and early childhood educators need to create opportunities for children to play. What we emphasize here is that we need to remember that worlds are constructed through play. Thus, we must carefully attend to the worlds that children, with or without adult participation, create through play. This is why it is unlikely that educators will hear pedagogists making statements like “It is important that children engage in more dramatic and collaborative play,” “These children are engaged in dramatic play,” “Children need to play outdoors more often” and so on.

Pedagogists engage with educators to think about play differently. Because they are concerned about what worlds are made in the daily living of early childhood spaces, pedagogists often ask questions such as “What worlds might we be worlding through play?” or “What modes of sociality might we want to nurture or interrupt in this play event?” or even “How does this play encounter create conditions for

racism to flourish?” to just name a few.

Pedagogists work with the idea that we don’t teach children to play in early childhood education. Rather, as Viktor Johansson (2019) writes, “the complexity of life, in all its incongruence, in its sensual carnality, in banality and sincerity, in all its joy and discouragements, our existential stance is part of the learning, upbringing, and teaching that are explored in [play] pedagogy” (p. 13).

### References

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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.*

### BC’s New ECE Wage Supports, Continued from 15

an ECE wage grid (within an associated funding model). But the test only involves 50 programs, and there’s no clear sense of when they will scale up to a sector-wide wage grid, despite all the learnings from six years of funding \$10aDay sites.

All in all, when it comes to solving the ECE wage/compensation problem, BC is stuck in a kind of one-off, stop-gap mode.

It’s not clear why BC is proceeding so slowly compared to other provinces and territories, but whatever the reasons, BC needs to catch up.

Without a province-wide ECE wage grid with wages that are high enough, BC will continue to struggle recruiting and retaining enough qualified educators to staff the facilities that already exist, let alone expand the number of spaces to meet the needs of families.

The BC government needs to make child care expansion, and its key building blocks like an ECE wage grid, a top priority. It needs to allocate sufficient funding and test these improvements at scale/sector-wide.

BC’s ECEs are not just caregivers; they are educators engaged in intentional pedagogical work, enriching children’s lives, supporting families, and allowing parents to participate in the workforce. Their work has profound implications on the social fabric and economic dynamism of the province. They’re worth the extra effort, so let’s hope BC has more to say, soon.

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