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# Play's Liberatory Potential

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Early Childhood Pedagogy Network

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As we have written in past issues of *The Early Childhood Educator* (see Early Childhood Pedagogy Network, 2024a, 2024b), play is a complex concept in early childhood education. It is complex because we often forget “the trouble with play.” For instance, we tend to forget that sometimes play might maintain racist tones, gender norms, ableism and so on. Or we forget that play is not always “good” and “beneficial.”

In this article, we think about play from a different perspective. Specifically, continuing to address play's complexity, we engage with what happens when we think of play beyond a simple aim of meeting developmental goals. Instead, inspired by Alejandra Manena Vilanova Buendía's (2016) work on play, we propose that play offers a *liberatory* potential. That is, play might create opportunities for challenging power relations and opening up possibilities for alternative worlds.

Here is a play moment Vilanova Buendía (2016) describes:

In a class of three-year-old children, I observe two children heading to the construction space where they find blocks, tree bark and replicas of animals. The children arrive and observe the careful distribution of the materials in small plastic boxes that allows them to recognize ... by shape and size. The distribution of the

furniture limits the space but generates shelter and coziness... In front of the blocks, a small, low table invites children to raise their constructions from the ground. Light indirectly illuminates the space. The two children begin their construction with blocks of different shapes in such a way that they place them next to each other until a closed shape is created. In the centre they place two plastic reproductions of animals. When the construction satisfies the two children, they inhabit it with the animals and with their actions where it is no longer known if they are inside or outside the construction. (p. 57, our translation)

As Vilanova Buendía explains, it's obvious in this excerpt that play has become an early childhood instrument used to meet specific learning goals. That is, play is now seen as having a particular goal, as a strategy for teaching and learning that needs to be controlled and guided toward certain interests. In most cases play matters because it allows children to develop as full human beings or to learn concepts and behaviours that are widely accepted within our society. Thus, as educators we bring materials into the classroom that help us meet our developmental goals for children through play. We might bring dolls, cars, or blocks, allowing children opportunities

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to develop socially, emotionally, and intellectually. The problem, as Vilanova Buendía (2016) writes, is that we tend to close ourselves up, missing the potential that play has to rethink the world.

As educators, when we observe children playing, we tend to name the type of game they play, generally tying it to theories of development to be able to pigeon-hole it. The action of playing, from the adult's point of view, is usually interpreted and connected to an evolutionary stage because, in this way, we prevent the play from taking a course that is foreign to the one that is already pre-established. This shows a certain fear on the part of the controlling bodies that different paths might be followed from those already determined. (p. 58, our translation)

Inspired by Vilanova Buendía's writings on play, pedagogists at the Early Childhood Pedagogy Network move away from thinking about play as having a learning/developmental goal. Play can instead, as Vilanova

Buendía proposes, be thought of as a space in which children can open themselves up to the world. In other words, play can have liberatory potential instead of the closed aim of meeting developmental goals. As children play, they open themselves up to rethinking about the world through play:

The fact that play does not pursue an end, that it does not imply any utility, is linked to freedom, developing a potential that is difficult to control from the levels of power, which in today's society have found a way to control it that is not perceived as repression: the way of the market, of the control of the individual through the consumption of situations that are already preset, so that we voluntarily choose the foreseeable, renouncing its freedom. (Vilanova Buendía, 2016, p. 58, citing Cabanellas y Eslava, 2005, p. 123)

Thus, play is important in early childhood education—not because it allows children to develop as full citizens—but because it is through play that children can rethink the world in which they live.

We invite readers to visit the ECPN Field Notes <https://ecpn.ca/category/field-notes/> and Pedagogical

Narrations <https://ecpn.ca/category/pedagogical-narrations/> to find examples of how play can have a liberatory potential rather than be a tool for reaching preset developmental goals.

## 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 and Pedagogical Facilitator projects.*

## Child Care During Non-Standard Hours, Continued from 32

There are great outcomes with Danish models for child care right now; in fact, the Danish film industry is leading the world for women in decision-making and positions of power. There's certainly something to be said for generations of people landing on lists for the happiest people in the world.

In the UK, care is provided at some film studios where parents work. They have family-style dinners together, and parents come in to teach a little about the work in film, such as by giving acting classes to the kids. I think it's good for kids to be physically close to their parents. The more we can build a community with parents and educators, the better.

### **GW: Any last thoughts?**

**HM:** I believe this work is more important than any corporate policy or profits, regardless of whether someone has children or not. Kids grow up to be the doctors and nurses who care for our generation, the policy makers and entrepreneurs finding solutions for climate issues and logistics challenges in society. Therefore, ensuring that children are healthy, happy, and safe is the most important foundational work we can do for society.

### **Reference**

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