

State of Play: Five debates that characterise play literature¹

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Abstract

It has been argued that the contemporary literature associated with the role of play in early childhood educational (ECE) curricula is characterised by “competition” and “collision” (Ailwood, 2003, p. 288; Wood, 2007, p. 309). These concepts of competition and collision reference the increased debate in the ECE field about how play is used in the curriculum and to what end. Whilst progressive discourses have advocated the value and indispensability of play as a central feature of ECE curricula, essentialist and reconceptualist arguments have questioned the grounds on which it has been advocated. A significant portion of the reconceptualist and critical literature repositions hitherto assumed “facts” about play into a space where they may be re-evaluated. The resultant landscape is one characterised by these spaces. This literature review proposes a framework for conceptualising the contemporary landscape of the play literature in terms of five crucial debates. These include debates over (1) the educative value of play time; (2) play as a site for power differentials (both student-student and teacher-student); (3) the ethnocentricity of pro-play rhetoric; (4) the universalist treatment of individuals through play advocacy; and, (5) the privileging of “expert” stakeholder perspectives in play research. Conceptualising contemporary play literature within these five debates may be a useful framework for examining how play is understood and used in early childhood curricular discussion.

Introduction

Play has held a valued place in early childhood research (Wood, 2007), not least because of its “hallowed status” as a site for learning, entertainment and the stimulation of well-being (Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993, p. 107; Nutbrown, Clough, & Selbie, 2008). Play proves both alluring and elusive as a curricular tool: promising freedom of choice (Wood, 2010) and benefits for children’s intellectual, social, emotional and physical development (Nolan & Kilderry, 2010; Wyver, Tranter, Naughton, Little, Sandseter, & Bundy, 2010), but also the problems of succinct definition (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Gordon, 2009) and conclusive empirical quantification of its benefits (Barnett, 1990; Trawick-Smith, 1989). Dominant conceptions of play have typically emphasised its alignment with the inherent “nature” of the child (Chung & Walsh, 2000), and therefore play’s amenability to free, self-guided learning (Wood & Bennett, 2000). However, self-guided learning has proven easier in theory than practice (Bennett, Wood, & Rogers, 1997). As such, play “constitutes one of the most enduring discourses” in early childhood education (ECE) today (Wood, 2008, p. 6).

Comprehensive review and examination of the early childhood play-based learning literature suggests that this contention may be understood in terms of five critical debates. Summarising the diverse and disparate literature associated with the role of play-based learning in five debates provides opportunities to identify, examine and understand perspectives on play. This offers a useful framework for play-based research activity, the continued development of play-based pedagogies and policy formation.

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Play-based curricula

As a source of discussion, play has enjoyed a long history. Plato's *Republic* (c. 380 BC) advised, "avoid compulsion, and let your children's lessons take the form of play" (cited in Kirkpatrick, 2008, p. 39). However, the incorporation of play into western curricula occurred "relatively late" in the development of educational theories (Brooker, 2010, p. 40). Many scholars attribute the birth of play's prominence in Euro-Western settings to early Romantic philosophers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Pestalozzi, and Friedrich Fröbel (e.g., Nutbrown *et al.*, 2008; Guldberg, 2009). Their ideas, sourcing "scientific vindication" from what is popularly understood as Jean Piaget's stages of development, have been carried forward in mid- to late twentieth century via progressive movements as child-centred, play-based education (Walsh, 2005, p. 42; Chung & Walsh, 2000). This ethos is most famously embedded in the US Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) guidelines (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), today's "consensus definition of high quality early education" for western countries (Ryan, 2005, p. 99; Edwards, 2003).

Play's Reconceptualist Era

As play has come to enjoy much attention as "the dominant pedagogy of choice" (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, & Flear, 2009, p. 50), its benefits have become the subject of many studies (Christie, 1991; see Barnett, 1990 or Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993 for overviews). Since the 1990s, however, its centrality became the subject of increasing scrutiny as scholars "began to challenge the dominance of the traditional, developmentalist view of early childhood and engage publicly in the process of reconceptualising early childhood educational theories, practices, and research" (Thornton & Goldstein, 2006, p. 516). Play-based, child-centred learning has become the object of critique from essentialist factions of the field (Hutt, Tyler, Hutt, & Christopherson, 1989; Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2006; Hedges, 2010), and from the alternative perspectives espoused by postmodern authors (Soto & Swadener, 2002).

The diversity of such perspectives is reflected in the contexts from which play discourse has proliferated – from the home to school, the laboratory to parliament (Broadhead, Wood, & Howard, 2010). A burgeoning reconceptualist literature sought to question and analyse "the role, purposes, and the value of play in the early years curriculum ... [keeping] play high on educational agendas in policy, research, and practice" (Wood & Atfield, 2005, p. 1). Play's status has become increasingly challenged on the grounds of inequity based on "culture, social class, gender and ability/disability" (Wood, 2008, p. 8). Feminist and post-developmental discourses began to dissemble "the dominant discourse in early years education, created by experts and overly influenced by American and Anglo-centric views of children's development" (Walsh, McGuinness, Sproule, & Trew, 2010, p. 54). Literature also challenged "the justifications for viewing play as a universal pedagogic practice" (Brooker, 2011, p. 142), particularly from cultural historical and postdevelopmental perspectives (Flear, 1996; Edwards, 2003; Löfdahl, 2005a; 2005b). This is true for critical perspectives also (Cannella, 1997; Blaise, 2009; 2010a). The resultant face of play-based learning discourse is typified by "competition" and "collision" (Ailwood, 2003, p. 288; Wood, 2007, p. 309), and can be conceptualised in terms of five critical debates:

1. '*Content*': Is play always educational, and does it teach the essential components of the curriculum?
2. '*Power*': Can play be a site for child-child and adult-child discrimination, based on race, gender, proficiency with English, (dis)ability, age, size, skin colour, class,

- sexuality and more?
3. *'Euro-centrism'*: Do discourses endorsing play privilege western conceptions of the child?
 4. *'Universalism'*: Do pro-play discourses reify a universal image of the child, limiting the field's potential to understand individuals?
 5. *'Stakeholders'*: Does the play advocacy enterprise privilege "experts" such as scientists and policy makers over other significant stakeholders such as the practitioner, parents and the child?

These five debates are presented as a reading of the increasingly complex body of play literature, one which may be used as a five-tiered framework helpful in document analysis. The framework has been used in previous work for examining how accurately policy documents reflect contemporary politics within the play-based learning literature (Colliver, 2010). Because the five debates arguably represent the main threads of discussion, the framework was used to evaluate how contemporary the views of play are in *Being, Belonging and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (or the EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). This research found that, through a variety of discursive techniques, the EYLF diverts attention from the unresolved nature of these debates in order to create a conclusive (rather than a debated) image of research about play's role in early learning (Colliver, 2010). In this way the five debates may be of use in drawing attention to omissions and misrepresentations within particular policy curriculum documents.

They may also be used to compare curricula. For example, in my proposed doctoral research (Colliver, 2011), I explore the pertinence of these debates to contemporary practice in alternative play-based curricula such as Montessori, Waldorf Steiner and Reggio Emilia Approach classrooms.

This review will outline each of the five debates identified within the play-based learning literature. After describing each debate, some of the future directions that scholars suggest the field should navigate towards are also explored.

Debate 1: Content

The first of these debates charts "discussions regarding ... the place and value of subject or learning-area knowledge" (or content) in play-based curricula. These discussions typically hinge on prioritising the "process of learning" over the "product" (content) (Krieg, 2011, p. 47). Discussions often become quite polarised (Hedges & Cullen, 2005).

The origins of a "process over product" discourse are varied and complex, but for the purposes of this review it is worth suggesting that Jerome Bruner's (1960) promotion of "self-guided learning" was highly significant (Murray, 1979). Bruner described how Piaget's stage theory provided a framework with which to understand how to teach *any* given subject matter to a child of any chosen age "in some honest form" (p. 33) – a comment that sparked much debate over whether, for example, "[Bruner] really [thought] that calculus can be taught to six-year-olds" (Bruner, 1977, p. x). Despite the criticism it received, the idea that "a curriculum for all grade levels based on the same essential ideas" could teach any subject content became a driving force in the popularization of Piagetian applications to education (Spodek & Saracho, 1999, pp. 7 – 8; Murray, 1979). As dominant discourses confounded these applications with ideas about the "nature of the child" (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 146) - where play is a naturally-occurring activity for children - it became accepted that, if it was facilitated "in ways that were developmentally appropriate to them", children could learn anything (Spodek & Saracho, 1999, p. 8). Play came to be seen as the "tool through which children" could achieve such an end (Ailwood, 2003, p. 292).

More recent research has gone a long way in providing, in contrast, “findings that free play degenerate[s] into ‘messing about’ because the children [often] lack a focus or the ability to develop the play theme” (Wood & Bennett, 1998, p. 25). Much literature traces the resounding teacher experience of “fear of intervening inappropriately ... tend[ing] to stay out of children’s play ... hav[ing] a tendency to not focus on skills” (Schickedanz, 1994, in Grieshaber, 2008, p. 507; Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2009). Such findings have validated criticisms of play-based learning, stirring up “debates about the place and value of subject or learning area knowledge in early childhood pedagogy” (Krieg, 2010, p. 47).

In questioning how play might be educative, related assumptions about “the role of adults” in learning through play have come under scrutiny (Walsh, *et al.*, 2010, p. 55; Sandberg, 2002). Such assumptions originate from popular developmental notions that “child’s play is the infantile form of the human ability to deal with experience by creating model situations and to master reality by experimenting and planning” (Erikson, 1964, p. 222) – an idea forged from Freudian philosophy and molded into developmental perspectives (Edmiston, 2008). Piaget (1962) incorporated this emotional value into his theory of play (in which play is a cathartic purging to “assimilate reality to the ego” (p. 134)). The independent learning “inspired by Piaget’s concepts of cognitive development [ruled that] certain concepts should not be presented to children until they reach the appropriate level of cognitive development necessary to understand them” (Spodek & Saracho, 1999, p. 8):

Because children use the arts and play to express personal feelings, many early childhood educators believe that teachers should not interfere with children’s creative activities.... With adult intervention, the play and art activities would become expressions of the supervising adult rather than of children. As a result, it was felt, the emotional needs of children would not be met. Teachers were told instead to closely observe children’s play and record these observations to gain insights into children’s minds and hearts (Spodek & Saracho, 1999, p. 6).

The application of these ideas to curriculum planning also sparked much debate that “represent[ed] a more general shift in theoretical perspective concerning the nature of children’s learning, from a developmental ‘ages and stages’ perspective (usually associated with Piaget) to an increased appreciation of the role of adults in scaffolding and co-constructing learning for children (usually associated with Vygotsky)” (Walsh, *et al.*, 2010, p. 55).

This debate has paralleled research showing that sound knowledge of subject content (Anning & Edwards, 2006) allows educators to guide play (Edwards, Cutter-Mackenzie, & Hunt, 2010) by weaving in ‘teachable moments’ (Woods & Jeffrey, 1996), and maximizing “play effects on cognitive development” (Trawick-Smith, 1989, p. 165), boosting its educative value (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; Anning & Edwards, 2006). Adult guidance has also been used in play with special needs students as an effective means to cultivate “full participation, full membership, valued citizenship” (Kliwer, 1998, in Edmiston, 2007, p. 339).

The above findings justify the socio-cultural emphasis on peer- and adult-interaction (Hedges & Cullen, 2005). Much literature has also suggested future policies implement a “shift from developmental to sociocultural orientated curricula with an emphasis on the contextually defined nature of knowledge” (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2006, p. 18). Vygotskian notions of “scaffolding” are cited

as a pedagogy ... seen to be successful in practice because the teacher/adult, through providing the support that is needed for the child to achieve a successful outcome (or understanding) has been required to first identify (assess) what the child’s current (unaided) capability/understanding is, and then, in the process, and as a result of their provision of the appropriate support they ensure the child has a good grasp of what a successful outcome actually is (i.e. what it is that they will later be aiming to achieve on

their own) (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, p. 727; parentheses in original)

This first debate of five has proven fruitful in raising “a broad consensus” (Wood, 2007, p. 317) on the need for “a balance between the opportunities provided for children to benefit from teacher-initiated group work, and in the provision of freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities” (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, p. 713). Where this balance sits – and how to achieve it in the classroom – is a matter of continued and constant inquiry in order to be determined. As one teacher maintains, “By being with them ... [so they can] play in a better way.... I can extend them in the way I would in any other activity” (Wood & Bennett, 1998, p. 27).

Debate 2: Power

Recent ECE literature has addressed some of the many issues to originate from a postmodern, globalised world (Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). Reconceptualist notions of play “[question] long-established truths about ‘free-choice’ and ‘child-centredness’ in light of social diversity and complexity” (Wood, Broadhead, & Howard, 2010, p. 2). Possibly due to the number of texts exploiting critical theory and Foucauldian notions of power (Foucault, 1980), debates about play as a site of power differentials are the most voluminous.

Contemporary literature advises that “building a curriculum around children’s choices, needs and interests is ideologically seductive [but] conceptually weak in practice, [as choices] may be fleeting or sustained, trivial or purposeful ... biased in terms of culture, social class, gender and ability/disability” (Wood, 2008, p. 8). Principally, most literature represents accounts of play as a site of discrimination, based on age and physical size (Löfdahl, 2002; 2005a; 2005b; 2010; Holland, 2003), (dis)ability (Edmiston, 2007; Barton & Wolery, 2010; Warming, 2011), gender and sexuality (Burman, 1994; Danby, 1998; MacNaughton, 1998; 2004; 2005; Blaise & Andrew, 2005; Sumsion, 2005; Wood & Cook, 2006; Blaise, 2009; 2010a; 2010b), social class (Campbell, 2005), race, skin colour, language and proficiency with English (Brooker, 2005; 2010; Campbell, 2005; MacNaughton, 2005; Wood, 2008), and religious affiliation (Wood, 2010). Power differences occur in child-child, adult-child, and institution-child domains.

Age and physical size

Literature on play has documented “experiences from several ethnographic studies of children in preschool reveal that, in the teacher’s absence, children can behave very unkindly to each other” (Löfdahl, 2010, p. 127): “some play is hard and hurtful” (Richardson, 2009, p. 5; Holland, 2003). It has been argued that this play does not sit easily with adults’ romantic conceptions of the child as “innocent” (Blaise, 2009). For example, it has been shown that adults admonish physically or conceptually violent play, often dismissing the idea that it is play (as much as any other form) (Holland, 2005). These are more obvious ways that play can be hurtful, and may be considered one way that “pre-school children within the context of play communicate and act in relation to social participation and power” (Löfdahl & Häggglund, 2006, p. 179).

However, recent reconceptualist perspectives are highlighting more covert and subversive forms of power play that may be just as damaging. Recounting data from video recordings of children’s play, Löfdahl and others (Löfdahl, 2005a; 2005b; Löfdahl & Häggglund, 2006) demonstrate this by charting cumulative experiences of young children in a way which “visualizes the ‘invisibility’ in apparently harmless events spread out over time” (Löfdahl & Häggglund, 2006, p. 184). Other work describes the experiences of a younger girl

consistently excluded from play with older children in ways which subvert adult rules to foster an environment of inclusion (Löfdahl, 2005a). In this way, poststructural perspectives have allowed scholars to find power constellations in deeper and subtler forms than mere physical intimidation based on physical size or greater knowledge resulting from to being older (Löfdahl, 2005a).

(Dis)ability

While reconceptualist work in the area of mental and physical disabilities or developmental delays is limited, the literature supporting play for practitioners to use as a platform common to the child and adult is growing (Edmiston, 2007; Ganz & Flores, 2010; Elmore & Vail, 2011). Typical findings advocate play assisted by adult participation (Edmiston, 2007) and “adult prompting of pretend play” (Barton & Wolery, 2010, p. 18), visual scripts (Ganz & Flores), provision of toys inviting social interaction (Elmore & Vail, 2011), and so on. Whilst it is identified that discourses of inclusion are stronger in rhetoric than practice (Warming, 2011), “[r]ecent research has supported the use of play and social skill groups that include children with ASD [autism spectrum disorder] and typically developing peers to improve interactions and play skills”, and thus it is contended that inclusion discourses will strengthen (Ganz & Flores, 2010, p. 60). Because reconceptualist literature seeks to deconstruct “professional discourse [that] can unwittingly encourage us to reify labels that are always socially constructed categories”, adults can model the inclusion of all children (Edmiston, 2007, p. 338). Play is thus earmarked as a way to overcome what would be conventionally conceived of as “disability” and reduce the barriers of physical differences between players, but the way it can exploit power differences must be accounted for.

Gender and Sexuality

Pluralist understandings of gender and sexuality constitute another burgeoning field of discourse for play literature. Because free play is characterized by children’s choices, it is a rich source of information about their understandings of sexuality and gender (Wood & Cook, 2006; Blaise, 2010a). Rather than “shut [sex-related play] down, or restrict them from playing it” (Blaise & Andrew, 2005, p. 52), scholars strive to uncover how “girls and boys organize and build their social worlds of play ...building their social orders” (Danby, 1998, p. 175). Not only do they depict girls and boys playing very differently, according to gender roles (MacNaughton, 1998; Wood & Cook, 2006), but they also challenge dominant beliefs about “childhood innocence”. They demonstrate “that children do have a considerable amount of sexual knowledge”, even if this knowledge does not explicitly relate to non-normative gender behaviours (Blaise 2010a, p.7). Critical and Marxist theoretical frameworks serve to understand how “meaning construction ...is something that we do as individuals but it is always inseparable from our culture and the power relations embedded in our culture” (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 56). Paraphrasing Marx, MacNaughton explains, “Children make their own meanings but not under conditions of their own choosing” (p. 56).

As an adult-child power imbalance, critical and feminist literature has challenged the edifice of dominant perspectives in early childhood education. Piagetian, child-centred approaches designate “intervention as tantamount to authoritarian repression”, meaning may not detect gender-based power differentials (Burman, 1994, p. 166). For example, when a teacher was verbally abused by her 3 year-old male students “using sexist language”, her subscription to romantic notions of the child encourage her to interpret this aggression as “natural” (ibid). As a role model to younger females in the room, the “power relations embedded in [her] culture” have been the conditions for the maintenance of patriarchal power structures (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 56).

The overarching institution of education is seen to hold power over the child also (Cannella, 1999). Piagetian and developmental conceptions of the child as an active and independent learner ensures “parent and child mirror the heterosexual and gender roles of woman and man through the positioning of woman as carer and the developing child as masculine pioneer” (p. 158). Such meta-discourses serve to construct the feminine as undeveloped, immature and undesirable, and the masculine as the inverse. Sumsion (2005) recounts student’s idealization of normalised conceptions of masculinity in a male teacher, and how this interacted with the authority they constructed via his “surveillance of them ... to encourage their conformity to ‘normal’ and ‘desirable’ behaviour” (p. 68). Again, power is seen to result from super-personal, cultural structures.

For MacNaughton (2004), who identifies as a “critical constructivist”, “individuals, culture, meaning and power are intimately connected and inseparable” (p. 56). For this reason, creating for children freedom from the regulating power of gender roles is not as simple as changing children’s activities as this “does not... do away with power but displace and reconfigure it in different ways ...[which] cannot simply be assumed to be more humane or democratic” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, in Campbell, 2005, p. 149). In sum, “deliberately practicing for liberty” (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 119) “is an ongoing battle” (Campbell 2005, p. 160), a process of constantly “disrupt[ing] the gender-stereotyped play [you have] observed” (MacNaughton, 1998, p. 152).

Race, Skin Colour, and Language

With increasingly multicultural classrooms, early childhood education is presented with more complexities than ever, especially in relation to “free choice” and “free play” (Ryan, 2005), where choice may be culturally determined. In her enlightening accounts of the differences between some children’s home and school learning objectives, Brooker (2002; 2003; 2005; 2010) shows how play-based classes conflict with the principles of learning in some cultures, reflected in the student’s family’s beliefs about learning. For example, an interview with the Bangladeshi mother of Khiernssa, a 4 year old enrolled at a play-based reception class in an English provincial town (Brooker, 2010, p. 45), tells of her explicit teaching of Khiernassa the Bengali, Arabic and English alphabets. She expresses her disillusion after enrolling her daughter there:

She has to work harder, you have to stop her playing ... every day, play, ‘what did you do?’ – ‘play’, then after school ‘play; Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday – play ... she has to stop playing! (Brooker, 2010, p. 49).

These sentiments about learning are paralleled in another Bangladeshi mother’s views:

When Abu Bokkar [her son] knows 10 words, why are there children who will not know one word? Because when teacher is teaching them, they are listening in this ear and taking it out of the other ear. Bokkar doesn’t do that, he is listening properly and putting it in his head! (Brooker, 2005, p. 124)

An unfortunate consequence of this conflict is that, conforming to pressures to succeed throughout their schooling experience – and despite exclusion from “full participation in white, Western-dominated school systems” (Hayes, 2001, p. 15) – children often must choose between maintaining cultural values and succeeding in class (ibid). Reconceptualist literature has thus sought to challenge child-centred values of child-initiated activities in which adults cannot interfere (Wood, 2008), calling for practices to reconfigure not only child-child but also institution-child power constellations.

For MacNaughton (1998), this involves close observation of the strategies children use to include and exclude, discussion of these with fellow practitioners, and then with pupils. For

Hayes (2001), it involves engaging students to examine whiteness (which is usually considered neutral) as well as other ethnic identities. Poststructuralist perspectives inform his view that “[p]ower is more than one particular facet of racial identity; it is *the* defining characteristic” (Hayes, 2001, p. 19). Hayes alerts his students that every act is a political one. He explains this citing “the simple act of a Samoan choosing an apple over a mango is a political act that carries vast consequences for all Samoans... White anti-racist identity is also a form of political action and the first move is to become aware that this is the case” (p. 26). Ryan (2005) pragmatically concludes, “if we are going to continue [the field’s] commitment to equitable experiences for children ... our interactions need to focus on helping children to understand the choices offered by different classroom discourses ... and the power effects of such choices” (p. 112).

Debate 3: Euro centrism

It has been noted that the preoccupation with play is a largely European one (Gaskins & Göncü, 1988; Fler, 1996; Cannella, 1997). From romantic conceptions of the child determining her or his own development (Rousseau, 1762/1993) to “scientific” support for “autonomy [which] was seen as central to fostering curiosity, confidence and competence”, play has “functioned as the guarantor of freedom and independence” (Burman, 1994, p. 165). Despite the difficulty in providing a convincing definition of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997; 2009; Gordon, 2009), the concept has been attributed several traits which psychologists and other writers have agreed upon (Holzman & Newman, 1993). In a text that widely references the work of Piaget, and to a lesser extent Vygotsky and Kohlberg, Monighan-Nourot and colleagues (1987) provide a taxonomy of traits which stands as a widely-cited, prototypical example of its dominant conception. Play is characterised by

- (1) active engagement, (2) intrinsic motivation, (3) attention to means rather than ends, (4) non-literal behavior, and (5) freedom from external rules (Monighan-Nourot, Scales, VanHoorn, & Almy, 1987, p. 15).

These traits describe “Piaget’s commitment to the modern project ... seen in his depiction of the developing child as a budding scientist systematically encountering problems in the material world, developing hypotheses and learning by discovery and activity” (Burman, 1994, p. 157). Yet this depiction does not fit that of Bangladeshi children, for example, in Brooker’s (2003; 2005; 2010) studies, nor the observational learning styles suggested as characteristic of many indigenous communities (Fler, 2004; Lillemyr, Sobstad, Bang, Marder, & Flowerday, 2007).

Play is conceived quite distinctly across cultures (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1979), and is not a universal construct (Fler, 1996; 2004; Lillemyr *et al.*, 2007; Nolan & Kilderry, 2010), its dominant discourse biasing a European style of learning (Göncü, Tufts, & Mosier, 2000; Fler, 1996; Gaskins & Göncü, 1988). Childhood “conceptualised as stages, norms and milestones... can serve to position groups and individuals in deficit terms” (Wood, 2010, p. 12), such that if, a child does not exhibit play-like behaviour when given the chance, teachers’ checklists would judge her or him deficit (Cannella, 1997). *Debate Three* is distinct from power debates in play (*Debate Two*) because it challenges the very conception of how children learn and the assumptions upon which play-based learning is predicated: it “not only denies context but also creates dangerous and inappropriate expectations for people living in a variety of contexts” (Cannella & Viruru, 1997, p. 126). To view education’s accepted ethnocentric conceptions of the child in play as merely differences in power misses the message that there must be other characteristics more fundamental to the child from which ECE could be benefitting. Furthermore, understanding other, culturally-embedded ways of learning might allow curricula to accommodate for different ways of learning at an individuals level (e.g., Gardner, 1993).

As an example of cultural bias, the DAP guidelines (“one of the best known examples” of explicit quality standards; Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999, p. 99) consistently “depict children as active learners” (Van-Horn, Karlin, Ramey, Aldridge, & Snyder, 2005, p. 326; Fler & Hedegaard, 2009), “always mentally active in seeking to understand the world around them” (NAEYC, n. d., p. 14). Yet these very perspectives have been criticised for representing “euro centric and middle-class views and life experiences and not speak[ing] for all cultures” (Soto & Swadener, 2002, p. 40; Kessler, 1991; Fler, 1996). In cross-cultural studies, “even the tendency to accord personality, individuality and intentionality to young babies also emerges as specific to western cultural beliefs” (Burman, 1994, p. 132). “Teacher’s efforts to foster autonomy” (*ibid.*, p. 167) and other traits of the Piagetian child therefore miss the full spectrum of possibilities.

As Wood (2007) sums up, “early childhood education is still influenced predominantly by Euro-American middle-class cultures and beliefs, and by highly individualised views of learning and development, which may constrain the critical examination of play from different perspectives” (p. 315). In this way, reconceptualist literature may be seen to be paving the way for broader, more respectful discourses about play and the child. As will be discussed in the next debate, literature is moving in more expansive directions than describing a universal child.

Debate 4: Universality

As they gained ground in popular discourse, the primary informants of modern education – “Piaget, psychoanalysis, and learning theory – described development in universal terms ... the same for everyone, everyone, across time” (Walsh, 2005, p. 43). Now with globalisation, increasingly larger portions of the world’s population are governed by increasingly fewer policy documents produced by increasingly smaller sections of that population (Brecher & Costello, 1994, p. 38; Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999, p. 88). Benefitting from simultaneously growing “social diversity and complexity” of a globalised community, reconceptualist scholars have questioned the universality of ideas encapsulated in ECE policy (Wood *et al.*, 2010, p. 2). For example, “[u]sing the lenses of feminist post-structural theory, and critical theory, contemporary researchers are challenging established assumptions about the universal efficacy of play” (Wood, 2007, p. 314), “and the limitations of interpreting play in relation to curriculum goals and objectives” (Wood, 2008, p. 9).

“Critical reconceptualist critiques of the universalizing, objectivist, normative, and rationalist theoretical assumptions of child development” (Edmiston, 2008, p. 3) have sparked *Debate Four*. Power is again an explanation to arise from this debate, but even critical theorists (normally concerned with power) identify that what is more significant is the failure of educational theories to explain the full potential of the child, and therefore of education – “overly focusing on younger human beings as the victim of educational discourse, as the ‘other,’ places them in positions to be further victimized” via the limited conceptions of the child (Cannella, 1999, p. 42).

The universalist discourses of education are multifaceted and dynamic. In her examination of the child study movement, and its evolution into developmental perspectives in education, Burman (1994) sees these universalist trends as “the drive towards rationality in models of development ... a reflection of the rationalization of the modern State” (p. 19). Mid- to late nineteenth century attempts to understand the child in a simplistic manner, however, “equated [her/him] with the ‘savage’ or ‘undeveloped’; since both were seen as intellectually immature, ‘primitives’ and children were studied to illuminate necessary stages for subsequent development” (p. 10). This is reflected in Piaget’s master work: “the specific problem of *genetic epistemology* is that of the growth of knowledge; the passage from an *inadequate, relatively poorer* kind of knowledge to one *richer both in intension and*

extension” (Piaget, 1972, p. 16; *italics added*). Due perhaps to Piaget’s life goal of “discover[ing] a kind of embryology of knowledge ... suited to [his] biological training” (Piaget, 1962, in Gainotti, 1997, p. 373), he reduces the child’s intangible and “open-ended” play to “an epiphenomenon, with no inherent value” (Silin, 1987, p. 1974). This reductionistic perspective has ramifications for the image of the child (Sorin & Galloway, 2006):

Borrowing from the embryologists, educators asserted that, just as individual members of a species repeat the stages of evolution experienced by their phyla in prenatal development, so humans after birth recapitulate the stages of cultural change undergone by humankind as a whole. This assertion made for an inevitable equation of the primitive with the childlike that had political implications for non-European people and pedagogical ramifications for children ... Piaget’s perspective is one that ultimately sees children as incomplete beings, falling short of adult standards of functioning (Silin, 1987, pp. 19 – 25).

However, no sooner had restrictive, universalist prescriptions of the child appeared than diverse experiences challenged them. Piaget’s model of development has long been critiqued for its underestimation of the young child’s socially- and culturally-negotiated cognitive development (Murray, 1979; Gelman & Baillargeon, 1983; Silin, 1987; Ebbeck, 1996). As most dominant theories of play place the child on a developmental trajectory from solitary to social play, recent literature also highlights the understatement of young children’s social and emotional abilities in popular discourse (Salamon, 2011). Piaget (1962) describes the development of play in terms of increasing sociality also.

Not only does the concept of development through play limit the child, but also that of the “play/work separation” (Cannella & Viruru, 1997, p. 126). The child-centred adage “play is the child’s work” may be viewed from postmodern perspectives, where “this opposition is nevertheless reinstated within the distinction between time-wasting, therapeutic and ‘productive’ play, with children directed accordingly” (Burman, 1994, p. 166). The intersection between some of the five debates is therefore also apparent from a historical perspective:

the very distinction between child and adult was elaborated alongside the separation made by modernity between public and private, work and play. These spaces and statuses are gender, class and age-related. Irrespective of the actual activities and abilities of women and children in building the societies we inhabit, the great paternalistic gesture of ‘women and children first’ is indicative of a general culture and legal infantilisation of women, and a corresponding feminisation of childhood, that also unhelpfully blurs the boundaries between them (Burman, 2008, p. 31).

Play/work deconstructions also foreground the manufacturing of an image of play homogenised by the globalised marketing that permeates so much of the planet:

Disney creates and perpetuates the binary illusion. At Disneyland and Disney World, the visual focus on fun, play and excitement so dominates that the workers (spending 8–10 hours on their feet in the hot sun) are invisible. Further, the visual illusion of play as universal and even equitable is created within the context of a prohibitive entrance cost; only the middle and upper class can afford Disney play.... The separation between the child and the adult is widened because the child is ground in the discourse of play while adults must function in the world of work (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 107).

In his analysis of historical constructs of play, Aries (1996) notes how play and toys were for people of all ages, and were often replicas of the real world. Today, however, play is constructed as something “only appropriate for children” (Cannella & Viruru, 1997, p. 125), and in many discourses, such as that of DAP, something that “children of all ages love to [do]” (NAEYC, n. d., p. 14) – such that to *not* play warrants parental concern (Cannella, 1997). Yet it is clear that these universalities are false. Reconceptualist scholars have played the important role which “contest[s] universal concepts about learning, development and play and the ways in which these underpin

institutional practices, and propose different ways of viewing children in relation to cultures, contexts and social diversity” (Wood, 2010, p. 12). In forging their way forward, it is “only with a disposition of continual critique [that] the underlying assumptions that limit human beings [can] be unveiled and educational practice be reconceptualized ...attempts to create new educational discourses that are not exclusive are needed” (Cannella, 1999, p. 42).

Debate 5: Stakeholders

In their summary of the effects of globalisation on education, Dahlberg and colleagues (1999) discuss how “quantification, based on standardization of measurement... has been a necessary condition for increasing globalization ... reliance on numbers and quantitative manipulation minimizes the need for knowledge and personal trust” (p. 88). For example, the proliferation of “evidence-based practice” in many fields has spread to education, where educational practice has become “subject to centralized agenda-setting” (Biesta, 2007, p. 2). “The scientific gaze” has become so entrenched, it is widely recognised that “education has entered a scientific era” (Burman, 1994, p. 12; Kamii & Ewing, 1996, p. 264), despite the failure of the scientific investigative enterprise to provide conclusive evidence which can be translated into educational practice (Barnett, 1990; Stephen, 2006). “The dominant discourse in early years education [has been] created by experts and overly influenced by American and Anglo-centric views of children’s development” (Walsh *et al.*, 2010, p. 54). These “experts” – psychologists, policy-makers and statisticians – “have tended to portray themselves as the only knowledge brokers in the field” (Soto & Swadener, 2002, p. 52).

The stronghold these voices have established may be understood in more complex ways than the mere product of globalisation. In “revisiting the question of evidence”, Dimitriades (2008) argues how “critical scholars” (p. 9) rejected the notion of “objectivity” as “a ‘God trick,’ a dubious claim that one can see from everywhere and nowhere simultaneously” (p. 6). However,

calling truth claims into question has eroded much ground beneath progressives. Calling objectivity into question has done little to contest the nihilism that seems to have largely overtaken the entire political spectrum. In the absence of truth claims, we are left with simple competing power blocs. We are left with a vision of politics that is simply about exercising and wielding power. As West (2005) writes, ‘when the lack of belief in the power of principles prevails, the void is filled by the will to power of the market, by the drive to succeed at the cost of others rather than the drive to decency and integrity’ (Dimitriades, 2008, p. 8).

For Dimitriades, “business logics” (p. 12) and “politically motivated agendas” have “walked squarely into this place” (p. 8). For Kane (2004), “the scientific world view” has been a “historical necessity” for “the rise of industrial capitalism” (p. 56). In early childhood, “elitist child development researchers” have dominated research (Soto & Swadener, 2002, p. 53), “rendered invisible and incontrovertible through the apparent impartiality of statistical norms and administration through the power of the institutions that can enforce statistical description as moral-political *prescription*” (Burman, 1994, p. 19; original italics). “The ‘experts’, whose quantified and objective knowledge is more valued by policy-makers, have often disregarded the practitioners’ voices ... Our field has been obsessed with scientific measurement of discrete and ‘objective’ variables quite distant from the daily realities of young children, teachers, and families” (Soto & Swadener, 2002, p. 53). We have “counfound[ed] mathematics and thought” (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999, p. 89). “As a consequence, ‘teachers’ and ‘teaching’ have not figured much in ECE ” (Grieshaber, 2008, p. 507).

Reconceptualist scholars have pointed to the lack of practical knowledge in the literature, which has been dominated by “formidable theoretical edifice[s] based on largely academic descriptions of human intellectual development and knowledge acquisition” (Edwards, 2003, p. 253). This is especially true for research-heavy discourses such as play. “Ideological commitment to subjects such as play [are seen] as ‘regimes of truth’ ... [as] generat[ing] an authoritative consensus about what needs to be done in that field and how it should be done” (Rogers, 2010, p. 153), “particularly where instrumental approaches to play are privileged” such as in policy (Wood, 2007, p. 319).

It is increasingly recognised that “policy documents, and policy-related research, provide a necessary but insufficient basis for the development of practice” (ibid.), and that the very often inherent “scientific, genetic epistemologies cannot begin to respond to all of the contemporary societal challenges” faced by play as a part of ECE (Soto & Swadener, 2002, p. 53). Reconceptualist scholars argue, “multiple perspectives and complexity characterise how play is enacted by children within the pedagogical orientations of their classrooms: these are places of tension, struggle and dilemmas (Sugrue 1997), not simply places where curriculum guidelines, educational theory, beliefs and ideals are put neatly into practice.” (Rogers, 2010, p. 153). “Legitimizing working knowledge” is one way to move forward, as “the practitioner is less likely to distort reality by being closer to everyday exigencies” (Soto & Swadener, 2002, p. 53; Burman, 1994; Wood, 2007; Grieshaber, 2008; Rogers, 2010).

Further, children must figure more in play research if it endeavours to reflect their experiences, in that

play cannot and should not be subordinated wholly to educational policy agendas that privilege narrow constructs of effectiveness and defined outcomes. Instead, the authors agree that play needs to be considered from the perspectives of the players – their motivations, meanings, intentions, imaginings and inventions, and in terms of the distinctive qualities and characteristics which mark out play from other activities, and especially from work. (Wood *et al.*, 2010, p. 2)

Incorporating “direct participants and legitimate indirect stakeholders” more wholly represents the complexity of pedagogy (van Oers, 2003, p. 12): “Profound and sustainable educational change and innovation require that we move beyond a search for a “correct” and accurate meaning and practice of pedagogy” (Luke, 2006, p. 3). Kane (2004) reaches past the work ethic of industrialized society towards a “play ethic”, which utilises Complexity and Chaos Theories as “a framework (perhaps one should say a sprawling, messy web) within which the ‘ambiguity of play’ matures into the complexity of play” (p. 63). Kane’s book demonstrates play can be understood in dynamic and open-ended – or *playful* – ways. For Wood (2010), scholars in this debate call for a “shift from the scientific search for norms and regularities, towards embracing complexity”, and – in play discourses – from “attempts to harness children’s learning and development in line with curriculum frameworks” to “truly free play [that] is open-ended and unpredictable, and is controlled by the players” (p. 13).

Conclusion

Early childhood education regards play as an essential element for learning and development (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Yet the assumptions about play used to generate this status have been increasingly brought into question (Thornton & Goldstein, 2006). These reconceptualist perspectives have allowed us to view play in continually more useful, socially just, and expansive ways. However, the landscape resulting from these and competing perspectives presents a baffling array of complexities and subtleties about play-based learning and the role of play in ECE (Wood, 2010). This review has suggested that the literature may be understood in terms of five main debates. Whilst the debates have not been presented as an exhaustive review of play-based learning literature, it is argued that

thinking about the contemporary play-based literature in this way provides an avenue for understanding how play might be positioned across and within a range of early childhood curricular approaches and policy documents.

Finally, this review provided brief summaries of the major ways forward suggested by scholars of the various debates. While these are concise, this review hopes that they inform future directions of play scholarship and policy. Collecting the conflicting, disparate and prolific literature in five debates aims also to forge new alignments and perspectives in our endeavour to improve the quality of early childhood education.

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