

**A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE OF THE VALUE OF PLAY  
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

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**A Parent's Perspective of the Value of Play  
in Early Childhood Education Programs**

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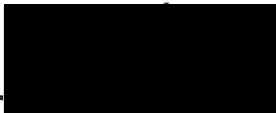


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I dedicate this to my husband, Zach,  
our two cats, Marla & Ellie, and our dog, Hazel.

Thank you all for your love, patience, support,  
and humour over the last two years.  
Much love.

### Abstract

Play has always been an important component of childhood development. However, there is presently a decline in the amount of play occurring in early childhood both at home and in the classroom. This is, in part, due to families pushing for high academic standards and traditional learning settings for their children. This study, informed by narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), aims to explore the question, “What is a parent’s perspective of the value of play in Early Childhood Education programs?” I endeavored to more deeply understand the value of play in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs from the perspective of a parent, regardless of the structure a program demands. Through an extensive review of the literature, I aimed to find a relationship between play experiences and the development of academic, fine and gross motor, self-regulatory and social skills in early childhood. I learned that, as students engage in play-based activities they explore language and communication skills, learn to problem solve, and develop critical thinking skills (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

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**Key words** – early childhood education, literacy, language development, dramatic play, Kindergarten

### Summary

This study, informed by narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), aims to explore the question, “What is a parent’s perspective of the value of play in Early Childhood Education programs?” I endeavored to more deeply understand the value of play in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs from the perspective of a parent, regardless of the structure a program demands. Through an extensive review of the literature, I aimed to find a relationship between play experiences and the development of academic, fine and gross motor, self-regulatory and social skills in early childhood. I learned that, as students engage in play-based activities they explore language and communication skills, learn to problem solve, and develop critical thinking skills (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

Children are intrinsically motivated to play and should be provided with rich, authentic play experiences in the classroom to enrich their skill development. As Munn (2010) asserted, “Play is held to be essential both as a means of learning and as a route to healthy socio-emotional development, but it is not always reflected in practice and policy” (p. 183). However, Ashiabi (2007) states that we are in an era where most adults and parents prefer early childhood classrooms that are more academically oriented than play oriented. He asserted that early childhood educators must recognize the importance of play in order to best support student learning. Through an extensive literature review and multiple research conversations alongside a parent participant, I explored the relationship between play experiences and healthy early childhood development. Through this research study, I hope to inspire educators to find a balance between academic structure and developmentally appropriate, play-based practice.

### Arriving at the Research

*Spring 2014 –*

*I've just verbally accepted a position teaching Kindergarten in the rural small town that I grew up in. Having taught in an even smaller town the past two years, I am excited about the change of moving to a bit of a larger school and finally teaching what I always hoped for – Kindergarten! I actually cried when I was offered my first position two years ago, because it was Grade 5 and I was terrified of teaching an older grade when all of my volunteer experience and summer positions had been in HeadStart or preschool. Finally, Kindergarten is ready for me!*

*Two days later –*

*I've just gotten a phone call about another interview. Yikes, I just accepted a different job two days ago, can I even go to this interview?! It's also for a Kindergarten position, but this time a 'Cogito Kindergarten' position in an urban setting. I want to move back to the city, having missed it since my University years. But what is the school demographic? How many kids? And what on earth is 'Cogito'?!*

*The day after the interview, about a week later –*

*I got it! I've had to verbally resign from the other position I had accepted, in a setting I would have been familiar with, and I'm moving back to the city to teach Cogito Kindergarten. The kids wear uniforms. What is this world I'm going into? At least they gave me a handbook...my summer is going to be full of reading about what exactly teaching 'Cogito' means.*

My study took place in an urban community in Alberta, Canada. I am a Kindergarten teacher with the academically driven Cogito program at M.E.H. Elementary and Junior High

School<sup>1</sup>. This school offers two streams of Kindergarten programming: The Global Classroom and Cogito Kindergarten. The Global Classroom, or traditional kindergarten, is a setting where learning occurs primarily through play and there are many areas of learning guided by students. Inquiry-based learning is common in this setting and children are able to freely explore their Kindergarten environment. Contrasting the Global Classroom setting is the Cogito Kindergarten program. The program name, Cogito is derived from the phrase, *Cogito, ero sum*, which means “I think, therefore I am” in Latin. The Cogito alternative program is a program with high academic standards, fact and repetition-based learning, and an academically driven pace. The Cogito classroom offers teacher-directed instruction, weekly testing, formal reporting, and percentage-based grades. Students are screened prior to entry into the Cogito program to ensure academic ability and readiness. The population of the Cogito class is typically socio-economically, culturally, and racially diverse with approximately one quarter being English Language Learners (ELLs).

This research took place with a participant, Michelle<sup>2</sup>, who is a parent of children in the Cogito program at M.E.H. Elementary and Junior High School. She is a mother of three children, two school aged – a daughter and a son – and a second daughter who is a toddler. I came to know Michelle as her two school-aged children were in my Cogito Kindergarten classes in past school years. A participant who chose the Cogito program for her children was preferred, as I wanted to learn about the play style of a family that is academically driven, while also being able to discuss shared experiences from different points of view within the academic program. Three interviews were conducted at Michelle’s home in the same urban center in which the school is located. The first was in mid-December 2019 and the second and third in early and late January 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> M.E.H. Elementary and Junior High School is a pseudonym for the school.

<sup>2</sup> Michelle is a pseudonym for the parent participant.



Interestingly, her family lives in the catchment area of the school and could attend either the Cogito or Global program, but she and her husband chose the Cogito program because they believed it was the best fit for their first child who struggled with some anxiety when other children do not follow rules. Michelle felt that the structure and routine of the Cogito classroom would be a benefit to her child, and has been happy with the program throughout her family's experience.

### **Approaching My Narrative Inquiry**

*Summer 2014 –*

*I walk into M.E.H. Elementary and Junior High school and navigate my way to the far back hallway where my classroom is. This is it, my new home away from home so to speak. At least this teacher left it quite organized, that's a bonus.*

*I peruse the shelves and spend the day exploring my new space. It's rather different from the classroom I was going to have at the other position I had considered. Where that classroom had tables, assorted seating, and various carpet areas for the students, this one is rather sparse. There is a large rectangular table at the back, about 22 desks with matching chairs lined up neatly in rows, a few toys – a small bin of Lego, wooden blocks, some old playdough, straws and connectors, and puzzles. Where is the space for imaginative play in this classroom? The other one had an entire playhouse....this one doesn't even have a kitchen center. What am I in for?*

*I continue pondering how to make this room my own, in hopes that I will be staying here long-term. It's Cogito...can I even put coloured paper on the walls? Can I have posters? Is it supposed to be stark and 'boring'? I better go find someone to get some answers...*

I engaged in this qualitative research informed by narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to learn more about the perceptions, experiences,

and thoughts that parents hold regarding the importance and value of play in Kindergarten education programs. This is relevant to me as a Kindergarten teacher in an academic setting. I teach in a Cogito program which involves teacher-directed instruction, formal classroom arrangements of desks in rows, and weekly Mathematics and English Language Arts testing. Parents receive percentage grades on such assessments, as well as formal report cards. This is different than all other Kindergarten education programs in our district that supply a checklist of completed outcomes rather than a graded report card. I am interested to know what “play” means to parents of children in such a setting.

As a Kindergarten teacher I recognize the value of play, as “play allows children to build and extend their knowledge and skills as they interact with their environment, with others, and on their own” (Glover, as cited in Ihmeideh, 2015, p. 250). Foundational language and literacy skills are developed in the early years of life, and play has a major role in the development of these skills. Kemple, Oh, and Porter (2015) assert that “play has been described as an important vehicle by which children develop self-regulation, social competence, memory, symbolic thinking, language, and problem-solving skills” (p. 250). However, as a Cogito Kindergarten teacher, I also value structure and routine. As a teacher in the Cogito alternative program I hope to motivate other Cogito Kindergarten teachers, as well as potentially all Cogito Division One (Grades 1-3) teachers, to find a balance between academically driven work and age-appropriate activities such as play. It is essential that educators focus not only on testing and repetition of facts, but also encourage children to participate in experiences appropriate to their age and developmental level.

Play is important in early childhood, and in some areas the time allotted for children to play is diminishing. I have found, through working with young children, an agreement with Bergen (2001) who states that:

Although pretend play has long been part of the early childhood curriculum, recent emphasis on accountability in education seems to have led to a decline in the general understanding of the contribution that high-quality play can make to children's cognitive development in the early years. (p. 2)

Kindergarten used to be a setting where students could explore the world in a child-centered context, however the setting has become more prescriptive rather than emergent in nature over the past years as mandated academic curricular standards become the focus. As Fesseha and Pyle (2016) contend, the obligation to teach prescribed, academic standards has resulted in pressures from administration and colleagues that teachers describe as limiting their ability to successfully preserve play in the classroom. They noted that, "In the current educational climate, teachers are required to negotiate a balance between mandated academic learning and developmentally appropriate play-based pedagogical practices" (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016, p. 365). At times, and in programs such as the Cogito program where I teach, there is a tension between the use of developmentally appropriate play-based activities and the requirement to cover curricular outcomes in more structures ways.

My research question is: "What are one parents' perceptions of the value of play in Kindergarten education programs?" Brown and Vaughn (2009) stated, "What difference does play make? The truth is that play seems to be one of the most advanced methods nature has invented to allow a complex brain to create itself" (p. 40). Although I recognize that there is value in play, I teach in an academically oriented Kindergarten program and have noticed that

there is a desire from parents and families for children to learn in a more structured, formal, and/or “academic” environment. My hope was to better understand parents’ perceptions of the role, and potential value, of play in Cogito Kindergarten classrooms.

Narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the methodology I used to help me engage in this study, involved researching alongside one parent of children currently enrolled in a Cogito classroom, who also had experienced having a child in Cogito Kindergarten. I invited a parent to participate in this research via purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) explains that “in purposeful sampling researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (p. 206). I knew I wanted a parent of a Cogito student but who is not a parent of a student I currently taught at the time of the interview process, as per ethics guidelines. Once I invited the parent, Michelle, to participate through a formal ethics-approved information letter and consent process, we began our research conversations. Together, we explored the Michelle’s experiences, as she told me stories of her experiences with play in her own past as well as what play looks like now for her children. It also involved the sharing of personal artifacts and photography. This research was a beneficial learning experience for both myself and the parent involved, as she had the opportunity to share and explore her stories of experiences, thoughts, and perceptions related to play in educational contexts. It provided insights into why some parents may choose to enroll their children into more traditional educational programs such as the Cogito program, while also allowing for discussion of what balance between play-based learning and more structured learning means in such a setting. My research will help parents and teachers to recognize the importance of a balance of authentic play experiences alongside more traditional academically structured approaches.

Looking to the future, I hope that my research regarding a parent's perspective of the value of play in Early Childhood Education programs inspires other early childhood teachers within my school and school district to incorporate more meaningful play experiences for their students. Teachers should seek out learning opportunities within their classroom to create a play experience that enriches student understanding of content. I hope to motivate teachers to follow a child's lead and help children to develop early skills by being active participants in play and creating meaningful opportunities for play. Students are not "just" playing, they are building essential skills through the play experience, and adults as facilitators need to create and participate in spaces that encourage meaningful play. Both Fesseha and Pyle (2016) and Peterson and Greenberg (2017) asserted that teachers play an important role in creating a play environment that encourages language and literacy development, and noted that the interaction of teachers with children during play supports and extends children's oral language. Posing questions to extend learning and engaging in conversation during play enhances the play experiences and facilitates language learning. This can be implemented throughout other curricular areas as teachers or parents pose questions and engage in conversation with students to encourage use of vocabulary throughout all subject areas. I hope that parents and teachers will consider sitting down more often to play with their children or students to further skill building opportunities within play experiences.

### **Exploring the Literature**

*Paley (2007) notes, "It did not occur to me that the distractions might be the sounds of children thinking" (p. 152). This resonated with me as I considered my first experiences teaching Kindergarten in my program. Paley's words reminded me that because there is often so much content that we need to get through, we forget to just let the children be little and have their own*

*wonderings. Paley wonders if her own voice is drowning out the thoughts of the students, and her words are a good reminder for me to let my students be little and engage in their curiosities.*

*Paley (2007) states, "The rules of teaching had changed; I now wanted to hear the answers I could not myself invent" (p. 155). This exemplified my feelings...through doing this myself I have the opportunity to learn alongside my students and experience the wonder of their curious minds.*

Play is essential in early childhood, as it is central to every child's development and considered to be the main source of learning during the early years (Ihmeideh, 2015, p. 250). As Ashiabi stated, "Young children are playful by nature. They choose how to play and what to play by using their imagination" (as cited in Ihmeideh, 2015, p. 250). Ashiabi (2007) noted that play is the most developmentally appropriate way for children to learn, as it facilitates problem-solving, perspective-taking, emotional and social skills, and the development of a theory of mind. Fesseha and Pyle (2016) highlighted that "when engaged in play experiences, oral language skills/learning is enhanced as well as numeracy skills, reading/writing skills, gross motor skills, social skills, inquiry-based skills. Essentially all aspects of development are enhanced for young children engaged in play" (p. 368).

However, despite the value of play, enrollment speaks for itself in demonstrating that there is also a drive for traditional learning settings. The Cogito program, in which I teach, highlights the importance of high academic expectations, teacher-directed structure, and an expectation of committed parental support to assist students with regular homework. Both Allendale School's Cogito Program, part of Edmonton Public Schools (2020) and St. Albert Public Schools (2020) websites highlight these important concepts as well as the fact that students are expected to increase their concentration, develop early literacy through explicit

phonics instruction, have strong mental and written math skills, and a strong work ethic. Adding to this concept, Loyens, Magda, and Rikers (2008) expressed the importance of learning programs that promote self-regulation in order to improve academic performance. They highlighted that learning comes first from a teacher directed format, and moves into self-directed learning as teachers release control over the learning throughout the process. This is similar to how lessons are formatted in the Cogito program. The teacher teaches, the class works as a group, and finally the students work independently.

Pianta, Whittaker, Vitiello, Ansari, and Ruze (2018) highlighted that when approached in a developmentally appropriate manner, teacher-directed instruction, the method used in Cogito, is an effective teaching strategy to expose students to new content. However, as the desire for traditional learning settings continues to grow, it is imperative that educators and parents understand the importance of play in the early years of life. As Pyle, Prioletta, and Poliszczuk (2018) noted, play is beneficial across five developmental domains: physical, language, social, emotional, and cognitive. Further, research shows that play advances the following skills: verbal, vocabulary, and language comprehension (Pyle et al., 2018). Research has shown that there are links between make-believe play and gains in a variety of cognitive performance areas (Christie & Johnsen, in press; Christie 1983).

Educators can benefit from understanding how play is used today in comparison to how it has been used in classrooms in the past to better inform teaching practice. Saracho and Spodek (1995) noted that:

Play has long been a significant part of Early Childhood Education programs. How play is used in programs today, as well as how it is regarded, often relates to how play has been conceived at various times in the past. (p. 129)

Throughout history, societal perceptions of play have evolved. Saracho and Spodek (1998) argued, “For centuries play has been a phenomenon that has piqued the interest of educators, psychologists, philosophers, and others who have attempted to define it, explain it, understand it, and relate it to the individual’s activities” (p. 1). From an educational perspective, play has nearly always been a part of Early Childhood Education as “play stimulates physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development in the early years” (Hewes, 2006, p. 1). Freidrich Froebel (1782-1852) developed the first recorded Kindergarten program in which the curriculum consisted of the manipulation of such objects as wooden blocks and wool balls, which he called gifts, as well as craft activities which he called occupations (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Froebel described play as “both a means by which children reveal their inner life as well as a process by which children develop awareness” (as cited in Kemple et al., 2015, p. 250).

In modern times, Sarah Smilansky noted the importance of dramatic play in early childhood classrooms and identified ways that educators can be effective in helping children learn to play in order to make it educational (as cited in Spodek & Saracho, 2003, p. 175). Dramatic play is defined as the “behaviours children use to transform the identities of objects, actions, and people” (Pellegrini, as cited in Heisner, 2005, p. 1). Engaging in dramatic play in early years allows children to experiment with language in a safe and comfortable setting with peers: “In dramatic play, children engage in a variety of different real-life scenarios, pretending to be someone or something different from themselves, and making up situations and actions that accord with the role they have chosen” (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, as cited in Ihmeideh, 2015, p. 251). Children are able to work through problems and communicate with their peers through this type of play. They are able to build on their current knowledge and expand their vocabulary and literacy skills.



Nugent (2017) wrote:

Expectations for kindergarten children have changed over time. Therefore, teachers in early childhood classrooms must make decisions about the best instructional methods to use to provide developmentally appropriate, meaningful learning experiences for their students while meeting academic requirements that result from the implementation of academic learning standards. (p. 15)

Pyle and Danniels (2017) noted that kindergarten classrooms have become more academically focused which causes an increase in teacher-directed academic instruction and a decrease in the length of time young children spend engaged in play. Teachers often feel pressured to cover a great deal of learning outcomes, leading some teachers to feel a tension between academic learning activities and age-appropriate practices such as play. This is especially relevant in a Cogito or other academically-focused education program, because as Riley (2012) noted, "Play as a whole seems to be outmoded as teachers are asked to increase student achievement" (p. 5). Play is often undervalued and children's opportunities to engage in free play both indoors and outdoors are under threat as "the physical and social environments of young children in the Western world have changed dramatically over the past several decades" (Hewes, 2006, p. 1). Children spend more time in organized groups and structured activities and are losing the opportunity to engage in self-initiated free play. There are multiple reasons that play has changed including: technology, a lack of space to play freely, and the priority given to academic expectations. Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Gryfe (2008) stated that "learning of factual knowledge is promoted at the expense of playful exploration" (p. 307). Rentzou, Slutsky, Gol-Guven, Kragh-Muller, Foerch, and Paz-Albo (2018) asserted that "play is more and more

silenced from educational research and practice and it constantly has to prove its place, status and role not only in children's lives but also in Early Childhood Education programs (p. 1)

Evidence suggests that not only is play diminishing at the student level, but from a teacher perspective as well. Bennett, Wood, and Rogers argued, "In the past two decades, early childhood teachers have exhibited less understanding of play" (as cited in Kemple et al., 2015, p. 252). Further, "preservice teachers' attitudes appear to be moving away from valuing play as part of educational experiences" (Kemple et al., 2015, p. 252). To remedy this, "Kindergarten teachers require professional development that permits the integration of knowledge of play and the implementation of play in an increasingly accountability driven environment" (Riley, 2012, p. i). Interestingly, in Kemple et al. (2015), Miller and Almo stressed that implications of a disappearance of play in early childhood education practice reach far beyond the classroom. They noted that while there is a drive for more accountability and more traditional academics in early childhood classrooms, there is also a need for students to build creativity that will last throughout their lifetime that comes not from high-stakes academics, but from learning through play.

The literature I have explored suggests that it is imperative that educators advocate for play in the classroom to support early childhood development that benefits lifelong learning. Early childhood teacher education programs should focus on the importance of play and produce educators who advocate for the importance of play in young children's lives and its place in early childhood classrooms, as "the fundamental role of the teacher is to use the natural spontaneous play of children in a way that has educational value while continuing to maintain its qualities as play" (Saracho & Spodek, 1998, p. 9). Pyle and Danniels (2017) asserted that "in the modern classroom child-directed play, collaboratively created play, and teacher-directed play all present

important opportunities for personal, social, and academic growth” (p. 287). To best support student learning, teachers should follow children’s lead and help children to develop cognitive skills by being active participants in play. Educators should act as mediators and facilitators to help scaffold play and direct, observe, and participate with children during play time (Banerjee, Alsalman, & Alqafari, 2016). It is critical that early childhood educators continue to advocate for meaningful child-directed play experiences in the classroom and find a balance between this age-appropriate play behaviour and the demands of academic curriculum. Finding this balance will provide an optimal setting for student learning in the early childhood classroom.

### **Strategies and Research Methods: Engaging in Narrative Inquiry**

*Fall 2015 –*

*I’ve taught Cogito Kindergarten for a year now, and I know something has to change. I go to my administration and am approved with a budget to purchase more play items for my classroom. I begin to work more closely with the Global Kindergarten teacher, whose class learns primarily through play in contrast to mine, where we learn through structure and more formal tasks. Our collaboration has me onto something - am I finding a new balance? Have I found a place for play in this academic setting?*

I came to my research puzzle through a period of self-reflection and wonderings about my own teaching practice. I had come to a point in my career teaching in an academic early childhood setting where I knew that something was missing in my classroom, and I wanted to find a way to meaningfully remedy the issue. This research project has been somewhat of a passion project for me as an educator and as an individual. I have always highly valued both play-based and more structured learning, and know that developmentally appropriate practices are what will help me to best meet my students’ needs.

Prior to conducting my research, I began reading the related literature to build up my base of knowledge. Fortunately, there is a good amount of research on Early Childhood Education (ECE) involving the benefit of play experiences and early childhood skill development. I read into other ECE research to continue building my knowledge of language development, social skills, parent involvement, the benefit or lack thereof of out of school activities, and a variety of other areas that impact skill development in the early years. Informal conversations with early childhood colleagues as well as support staff in my classroom, along with my Master of Education in Educational leadership cohort were beneficial in providing me different perspectives and reflections before and during my research.

I began my research process by meeting with the teachers, administration, and school district to obtain appropriate permissions. I then used purposeful sampling to find a parent who would be a good fit for, and be willing to participate in, my research study. I had initially intended to invite a parent of a current Cogito Kindergarten student. However, because it was not ethically recommended to conduct my research with a parent of a child currently in my class, I felt that I would gain better data and more authentic answers if I had a participant who was familiar with me before the research process began. I feel that I had an excellent, honest, and open participant who was willing to share both positive and negative perspectives with me. Michelle allowed me to delve deeply into my central phenomenon: “What is a parent’s perspective of the value of play in Early Childhood Education programs?”

Guided by the attached semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendices A, B, and C) and narrative inquiry methodology, I inquired into Michelle’s experiences to gain perceptions of the value of play. She currently has two children enrolled in a Cogito classroom who had both previously experienced the Cogito Kindergarten program. Upon inviting Michelle to participate

in this research, and having her consent (see Appendix D), we arranged our first interview for Tuesday, December 17, 2019. We then met on two more occasions: Tuesday, January 14 and Thursday, January 30, 2020. Interviews took place at Michelle's home, which was a short drive from the school location. Her children enjoyed popping in to chat with me and were excited to have their previous teacher in their home. I used the semi-structured interview questions to guide each conversation and invite generative responses. Following each interview, I transcribed our conversations and shared copies with Michelle. I used the transcriptions as a starting point for our next conversations and ensured that my perception of the content was the same as the Michelle's.

Narrative inquiry – as both methodology and phenomenon – calls for attentiveness to the experiential in an organic manner (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I began initial research conversations by attempting to co-compose a personal timeline of early life experiences of play and the progression of play throughout Michelle's life, including what it may have looked like in her childhood context. My imagined goal was to invite Michelle to better understand alongside me what play looks like and means to her as a parent. Data was simultaneously collected and analyzed throughout the process, and included transcriptions of our research conversations, field notes of communications, as well as reflective writing of our discussions and revelations that occurred through the conversations. Michelle shared photos of her Kindergarten classmates and classroom, as well as others of her school through the sharing of her school yearbooks. Data analysis was conducted and concluded throughout February 2020 and identified narrative threads running across our conversations, as well as possible tensions, gaps, silences, and resonances (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **The Shape of the Data: Narrative Threads**

*Katrina, in conversation with Michelle: "My understanding from what you have shared is that you highly value play, but you recognize the importance of clear academic structure in schools also. You see value in the development of social skills, fine and gross motor development, as well as learning to share and be a team player."*

The overwhelming takeaway from my conversations with Michelle was the value we shared of finding balance between (un)structured academic and play experiences in Early Childhood Education, in the classroom, the home, and in life overall. I came away feeling supported in my endeavor to include meaningful play in my classroom. I also came away having been able to see the classroom from a different lens than mine as a teacher; I was able to view it through the lens of a parent. I recognized that not only is there a value of play in early childhood programming, but that my students and their families are coming to me from different perspectives than my own. They come with their own experiences and views of what play means to children. It is in my power, as the teacher, to empower all children to learn valuable skills through play experiences in my classroom.

Two main threads resonated across our conversations. The first was *The Value of Play in Early Childhood Education Programs*, as the participant highly values play and expanded on many areas of learning that can occur through play. The second thread was *Family and Cultural Influence on Play and Play Experiences*.

#### **Thread 1 – The Value of Play in Early Childhood Education Programs**

Throughout our conversations, it was evident that although Michelle values academic structure in the form of more traditional teaching and learning methods in her childrens' school setting, she also highly values engagement with peers and learning through play. She expressed

the need for play to build social skills, learn to share and work as a team, problem solve, and also develop gross and fine motor skills. Michelle stated, "I feel that there is a way to educate kids to be able to go into Grade One cognitively, but they also have to be able to learn to move and socialize. And that happens largely through play." The following conversational exchange highlights this resonating thread:

Katrina: You value balance in your life, in your childrens' lives, and in their school lives. School is a place for academic structure and routine, but you've reiterated that there is a balance within that structure that could allow for play both inside the classroom and definitely outside of the classroom.

Michelle: That's correct. I feel that later on in life when you have a job and you are engaging with others, then play has taught them how to be a team player no matter what job they take. You won't be working absolutely alone and you need to be able to communicate with and have a skillset with people. And you still need the structure because you need the skillset to learn and research and understand the educational side of things. So it all ties together.

Interestingly, Michelle expressed that she felt there is also a place for play in the classroom beyond the Kindergarten year. Her children are in Grades 2 and 4 now, but still want to play for hours with Lego, Playmobil, or outdoor play to name a few items. She wondered whether there could be an opportunity for play in the classroom perhaps for early finishers or during indoor recess, rather than teachers simply turning on a movie. The school happens to have a Lego club for Grades 1-6 that runs after school that is nearly always full and has to turn students away, demonstrating the desire students have to engage in play experiences with one another outside of their structured academic classroom environments. I came away from our

discussions with a strong sense that parents like Michelle agree that a balance of structure and play is valuable in the Kindergarten classroom, as illustrated by this exchange:

Katrina: I'm wondering your thoughts on what the balance of play and structure would be in a classroom setting. My Kindergarten class would be about 75-80% structured and 20-25% play. It's definitely not 50/50. In a general Kindergarten program you might see 20% structured time and 80% play. So what do you think about the balance?

Michelle: I really liked my son's year of balance, with more field trips and activities. Sometimes I feel that there should actually be a little bit more play, but on the other hand I feel that there is a fundamental learning that also needs to be established. In the 2 hours and 15 minutes that you have them, you don't have time to do a 50/50 split and still maintain their focus to teach them something. But again, I really liked my son's year.

Katrina: I like that too. I think that when I started in the program it was about 85% structure and very minimal, maybe 15% play. So finding balance has been important for the teachers to realize that we could still cover all of the structured curricular content, but provide more engagement activities for the kids.

## **Thread 2 - Family and Cultural Background Influence on Play and Play Experiences**

*Katrina: How much do you believe, if at all, that your own cultural background influences you or your children's play experiences?*

*Michelle: I do believe that. My mom grew up on a farm and so did my dad and they were very involved in outdoor activities and that has then transpired into my childhood and now into my kids. We like to be outside when we can be outside, and even if I can't be outside with them I'll send them into the backyard to play. So I would definitely say yes.*



Through discussion with Michelle, it was evident that there is a cultural and familial component when it comes to childrens' play styles and ability to engage in authentic play experiences. She shared that her family background involved a great deal of outdoor play and exploratory play with friends and family. She expressed that she feels her upbringing, and that of her husband, strongly influences the way that they raise their own children and that she feels there is a cultural component to her childrens' play. Michelle has experienced various playdates with children of diverse backgrounds, both family culture as well as varied familial roles – an example being multi-generational homes, or parents with very rigid upbringing, and stated that children from these homes do sometimes need more coaching to play in a care-free age-appropriate way, in the way that her own children do:

Katrina: Your children engage in a lot of authentic play outside of school. Do you think that is mirrored in homes of the other children you know?

Michelle: Of the ones that I know and associate with, yes. The kids in our neighbourhood are quite involved in outdoor play, especially when it's nicer weather.

Katrina: Can you think of examples where you are concerned about the lack of play that kids might engage in, or families that you just know might not get that play experience?

Michelle: I do know some families that wouldn't have that experience, because their main focus is based on education and I feel that is the cultural diversity of the school that we are in.

Katrina: Your children are able to focus and be in a structured school environment, but they can also be playful outside of class. Do you think that they are unique in their desire to play and be able to put structure aside compared to other students they play with?

Michelle: I think that the other children want to be playful, but I don't feel that the opportunities are there.

Further, Michelle expressed that for children who do need more coaching to engage in play, it can be difficult to find the time to actually sit down and engage in play with her own children. She shared that she does know some families who do not engage in play with their children, but rather participate in alternate activities, such as baking with their children as a form of parent-child interaction and bonding:

Katrina: You said that you engage in play for about 15 minutes a week with your children, based on busy schedules. Do you think that is similar to other families – do you think that some families don't engage in play with their children?

Michelle: I know some families don't engage in play with their children. And I've talked to other parents and they've said that it is not their style of parents. They don't enjoy it and they'd rather do other activities. So that has been one conversation I've had with a parent, but then that parent is also more apt to bake with their child in the kitchen versus sitting down on the floor to play with them. But yet I have seen other parents who are so involved in playing with their children. Especially in the five-year-old range. They'll be in the kitchen and teaching them how to play kitchen, they're teaching them almost how to play. I think there is a wide variety of parent interaction styles.

It was clear from our discussion that parents have varied ideas of what play means to their family and their children. Coming from a multicultural school setting, this ties in with the varied perceptions that parents bring to the classroom regarding both the need for structure and the desire for a space with a lesser amount of play experiences than a typical Kindergarten classroom may have.

### **Reflecting Back & Looking Forward**

*I am reminded of a piece I wrote in an unpublished paper for a course in Fall 2019 –*

*Effective teaching pedagogy has the potential to allow learning to occur for all students.*

*Educators must recognize that teaching practice evolves and changes based on the needs of students in the class, the demographic of the school and classroom, and the educator's own experience. Just as students grow and change throughout the school year, so do educators, as well as society and curriculum. Huber, Caine, Huber, and Steeves (2013) share Connelly & Clandinin's (1998) idea that "curriculum is a life course, a journey that continuously emerges, taking shape along the way" (p. 223). This can apply not only to curriculum as it continuously emerges, but to educators as they continuously grow and change in their practice. Teaching pedagogy evolves and changes as educators engage in lifelong learning, which allows them to best meet the needs of their students.*

Having completed my research project, I am excited about what is to come. I have learned, and will continue to build on my knowledge, that play has a critical role in children's language and literacy skills and should be integrated with learning in a meaningful way. I am encouraged to continue on this path toward incorporating a balance of play and structure in my classroom, with the knowledge that parents often do support developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom, so long as there is a balance of play and structure. As I teach in a structured learning environment, this area of research allowed me to broaden my perspective on Early Childhood Education and the value of play-based learning.

Further, it has provided me with background information through the lens of a parent that will allow me to support my students and their families. I have the unique experience of working with parents who are largely on the opposing end of play-based learning, or are assumed to be

because they've chosen an academic program. However, I've accepted and realized the importance of balance between academics and play in order to best support student learning. Being able to validate the play and time students engage in unstructured activity within my structured Kindergarten day has been a great tool for me as an educator. I am able to share with families that play is the most developmentally appropriate way for children to learn, as it facilitates problem-solving, perspective-taking, emotional and social skills, and the development of a theory of mind (Ashiabi, 2007).

In my experience, some families expect that their child is in a desk, learning in a teacher-directed setting at all times. My research has, and will continue, to provide me a basis of knowledge that I can share with families and colleagues. It will allow me to provide evidence that play is essential and that children should engage in age appropriate play experiences in addition to completing academic work. I also hope to use play to solve social issues within the classroom and explain to parents how play can be used to build conflict resolution skills, especially in the area of dealing with frustrating situations and emotions. Dramatic play has been used for many years as a way for educators to promote children's social and emotional adjustment to new experiences (Christie, 1990). What an excellent tool to use in working with young children as they navigate the emotions of their first formal year in school.

The knowledge and perspective that I have gained through this research will be an asset to me in supporting and collaborating with other educators within my Cogito program as well. Not only my Kindergarten grade partner, but those in other Division One (Grades 1-3) classrooms. My understanding and growth as an educator through this journey will allow me to educate my colleagues on the meaning and value of the play my students engage in. Additionally, Michelle suggested that there could be a space for play in grades one or two as an

early finishers activity, or just a brain break for students. I look forward to creating this space for balance, extending from my Cogito Kindergarten classroom throughout Division One. I feel that this research will directly benefit the students I teach as well as the approach to teaching for myself and my colleagues in a positive way.

As I come to a close on this project, I feel fulfilled and empowered. I didn't know where my Masters of Education would lead me when I applied two years ago in February 2018, and whether I was looking for validation, or tension. Eisner's (1967/2004) words seem to wrap up my experience over the past months: "No matter what we thought we were attempting to do, we can only know what we wanted to accomplish after the fact" (p. 90). Ultimately, I hope to best serve my students, their families, and my school by finding and maintaining a balance between meaningful play-based learning experiences and academically driven curriculum.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Parent Perceptions of the Value of Play in Kindergarten Education Programs:**

#### **Possible Interview Questions**

##### **Interview 1 – December 17, 2019**

##### **Background - Central and Sub Questions:**

**Central Question:** What are one parent's perceptions of the value of play in Kindergarten education programs?

##### **Sub questions:**

- How does the participant feel about play in relation to education?
- What, if any, value does play hold in a classroom setting?
- What, if any, curricular objectives do you feel could be covered through play-based experiences?
- What is/are the tension(s) in the participants' perspectives of play in a classroom setting?

##### **Getting to know you questions:**

- (After I introduce myself) Please tell me a little about yourself.
- What is your earliest memory of play?
- What object(s) were you favourite to play with?
- Do you recall playing in your own school setting?
- What age are your child(ren)? What are their favourite things to play with?
- Can you tell me types of play that your child(ren) engaged in at different ages, for example ages 2-3, 4-5, 6-7 and so on? (Use this to create a timeline of types of play the child(ren) engaged in)
- Do you feel that play is different in 2019 considering your own child(ren)s' experiences compared to your own?

##### **For a participant who may have grown up in a county other than Canada:**

- At what age did you move to Canada?
- If you attended school outside of Canada, can you tell me a bit about what your experience in Kindergarten (or a comparable grade while you were ages 4-6) might have been like?
- What, if any, difference is there in the play you may have experienced in your childhood in (country) compared to when you came to Canada?

##### **Let conversation flow from here, some follow up probing questions include:**

- How often do your children engage in play - what type of play?

- Are you familiar with the term dramatic play? (If not, explain) How often do your children engage in dramatic/imaginative play?
- How does your child's change with an adult participant?
- How often do you as a parent engage in play with your child(ren)?
- How often do imagine teachers participate in play with their students?
- Give me a sense of what you think the ideal balance of play and structure would look like in a classroom. What might this include? Do you feel your child(ren)'s classrooms mirror this ideal balance?
- Do you feel that your child(ren) have a balance of play and school work at home?
- What type of play do children engage in at home? (Either individually or with others)
- Do you believe, if at all, that your cultural background influenced your or your child(ren)'s play experiences?
- Do you believe that socioeconomic status influences play experiences and ability to engage in play?
- Does gender influence the type of play a child engages in?
- Does age influence a child's ability to engage play experiences? How so?

## **Appendix B**

### **Parent Perceptions of the Value of Play in Kindergarten Education Programs:**

**Central Question:** What are one parent's perceptions of the value of play in Kindergarten education programs?

#### **Interview 2 – January 14, 2020**

#### **Some items I noticed from last time to branch out on:**

- Your children engage in a lot of authentic play outside of school. Do you feel that this is mirrored in homes of other children you know?
- Your children are able to focus and be in a structured school environment, yet be playful outside of class. Are your children unique in their desire to play, compared to other students in their classes?
- We talked briefly about natural play, that your mom ran at the preschool when you were a child. Can you recall any other elements of that? For example, having colours and going on a scavenger hunt to find things those colours.
- You mentioned that you are able to engage in play with your children about 15 min. per week, based on busy schedules. Do you feel that is similar to other families?
- Do you think that some families view school as being the place where children should learn to interact socially?
- If so, how do you see those skills being learned in early childhood if not through play? Through play?
- I had asked what the balance of play and structure would be in a classroom setting. Do you have any further thoughts on that? For example, our Kindergarten class would be about 75-80% structure and 20-25% play.
- Is there a place for play in the classroom beyond Kindergarten?
- What disadvantages might you imagine for students who come to Kindergarten not having engaged in preschool?
- Same question but those who haven't engaged in play group, extra curricular (sports, library program, gymnastics, etc.)
- Importance of recess and gym? As we don't get that type of play in Cogito Kindergarten as much.

#### **Further to follow up after:**

- What is/are the tension(s) in the participants' perspectives of play in a classroom setting?
- We talked briefly about where there was something specific you played with as a child. You mentioned a lot of outdoor play, at the farm, hay bales, railroad tracks, etc. Have you thought of anything further you would like to add?

- What is the main difference you see in play in 2020 vs. your own childhood?
- How often do imagine teachers participate in play with their students?
- Give me a sense of what you think the ideal balance of play and structure would look like in a classroom. What might this include? Do you feel your child(ren)'s classrooms mirror this ideal balance?
- Do you feel that your child(ren) have a balance of play and school work at home?
- Do you believe, if at all, that your cultural background influenced your or your child(ren)'s play experiences?
- Do you believe that socioeconomic status influences play experiences and ability to engage in play?
- Does gender influence the type of play a child engages in?
- Does age influence a child's ability to engage play experiences? How so?

### Appendix C

#### Parent Perceptions of the Value of Play in Kindergarten Education Programs:

**Central Question:** What are one parent's perceptions of the value of play in Kindergarten education programs?

#### Interview 3 – January 30, 2020

#### Further to follow up from last time that I didn't get to:

- What is/are the tension(s) in the participants' perspectives of play in a classroom setting?
- Does gender influence the type of play a child engages in?
- Does age influence a child's ability to engage play experiences? How so?

#### Some items I noticed over our last interviews that I want to confirm and have you expand on if you wish-

- My understanding from what you have shared is that you highly value play opportunities. You recognize the importance for social skills and gross motor development. You mentioned that your children engage in many types of play and that they enjoy being outside very much.
- You expressed that you feel there could be a place for play in grades beyond Kindergarten, perhaps to enrich lesson content. (Lego, Coding, etc.)
- As a parent in the Cogito alternative program you mentioned that you still value play in the classroom. In fact, that you enjoyed the year that your son was in Kindergarten more because there were more extension activities and field trips. You mentioned that you would like to see more movement breaks in your children's day. Also, that you recognize that play experiences could enrich learning of content – ex: sidewalk chalk for numbers or making our bodies into the shape of letters.
- I'm coming away with a sense that you value balance. That school is a place for structure, but that there is a balance within that structure that allows for play in the classroom.
- I was intrigued by my research question and working with a parent of a student from our alternative program, but I've really come away feeling like parents are on our side when it comes to finding a balance between structure and play.
- Do you have any closing comments that you want to share regarding further thoughts about the value of play?

## Appendix D

### Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent Form

**Study Title:** Parent Perceptions of the Value of Play in Kindergarten Education Programs

**Researcher:** Katrina Soprovich, B.Ed

My name is Katrina Soprovich and I am a Kindergarten teacher. I am presently completing a Masters in Education in Educational Leadership at Concordia University of Edmonton. As part of my program requirements I am conducting a research study. My research study focuses on parent perceptions of the value of play in early childhood education, specifically in Kindergarten education contexts. I would like to invite you to participate in this study. Before agreeing to participate in this research, I strongly encourage you to read the following explanation of this study. This statement describes the purpose and procedures of the study. Also described is your right to withdraw from the study at any time. This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Concordia University of Edmonton.

#### Explanation of Procedures

I am engaging in this research to learn more about the perception parents have about the value of play in Kindergarten education contexts. I hope to gain insight into your experiences regarding play in your own childhood compared to the play of your child(ren) engages in both in and out of the classroom. Research informed by narrative inquiry, the methodology I will be using to help me engage in this study, involves telling stories of your experiences and may involve the sharing of personal artifacts, photography and creative work, and/or the creation of life timelines. This study will involve meeting with you three times over the next four months to learn about and reflect upon your thoughts and experiences related to play. Each one-hour one-on-one conversation will be held at a time and location that you choose. Our conversations will be tape-recorded and transcribed.

#### Potential Risks

While I will conduct this research in ways that minimize any potential risks, possible risks to your participation in this research may include feelings of frustration or sadness when discussing your experiences.

#### Benefits

The anticipated benefit of your participation in this study is the opportunity to discuss your thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of the value of play in early childhood classrooms. The research will benefit you as a parent by better understanding your perceptions and experiences related to play. It will also inform my teaching practice and the practice of other educators who read publications or attend presentations related to this research.

#### Confidentiality

Your privacy and confidentiality is extremely important to me and I will protect it at all times throughout the research. All material collected will be safeguarded to ensure confidentiality. Study data, including personal information about you, will be securely stored for 5 months after the study is over, at which time it will be destroyed. Only I will have access to the study data and information. There will not be any identifying names on any of my research texts, notes, or interview transcripts. Your name and any other identifying details will never be revealed in any publication of the results of this study. The results of the research will be published in the form of a research paper and may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional meetings. The knowledge obtained from this study will be of great value in guiding early childhood professionals to be more effective in supporting parents and students.

Withdrawal without Prejudice

Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty. You are also free to refuse to answer any question I might ask you.

Further Questions and Follow-Up

You are welcome to ask me any questions that occur to you during the research. If you have further questions once the research is completed, you are encouraged to contact me using the contact information given below. If, as a result of participating in this study you feel the need for further, longer-term support, please contact me at any time using my contact information at the bottom of this page. If you have other questions or concerns about the study please contact the chair of Concordia University of Edmonton's Research Ethics Board at [reb@concordia.ab.ca](mailto:reb@concordia.ab.ca).

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name; please print clearly), have read the above information. I freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous.

---

Participant Signature

---

Date

If:

- (a) you would like a copy of your research conversation transcripts once they are available
- (b) you are interested in information about the study results as a whole and/or
- (c) if you would be willing to be contacted again in the future for possible follow-up research conversations, please provide contact information below:

Check those that apply:

- \_\_\_\_\_ I would like copies of my research conversation transcripts
- \_\_\_\_\_ I would like information about the study results
- \_\_\_\_\_ I would be willing to be contacted in the future for a possible follow-up interview

Write your address clearly below. Please also provide an email address if you have one.

Mailing address:

Email address:

**Researcher Contact Information:**

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