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FRAMING AND DEFINING PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

ELIZABETH WOOD AND LIZ CHESWORTH

The task of framing and defining play underpins the remainder of this book in order to contextualise ethics, theories and methodologies for designing play-based research methods. The complexity of play forms and manifestations across the human lifecourse make play difficult to define, let alone to capture through research. Accordingly, we are not proposing that play can be defined, but we are arguing for clarity in articulating our own positions, as well as understanding those expressed in research, from contrasting theoretical and methodological perspectives. The choices we make in our research depend on our own histories, traditions, cultures, values and life experiences, and these in turn influence the theories and methods that we choose. What and who we look at is also influenced by cultures and contexts, which means that reflections on our own interpretations of play need to be sensitive to social and cultural diversities, such as class, ethnicities, languages, gender, sexual orientations and religious affiliations, with the possibility that there will be more than one explanation for children's play choices and activities. Moreover, how playful pedagogies are conceived will depend on the early childhood education policy frameworks in different countries, and their histories, cultures and values. This introductory chapter aims to:

- Outline contemporary debates;
- Clarify contrasting perspectives on framing and defining play;
- Consider the implications for curriculum and pedagogical approaches.

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We define early childhood as birth to eight years, to reflect international variations in the age range for preschool and primary education, and the different types of settings that children of this age attend outside their homes – private, government-funded, voluntary and non-government organisations. The term 'practitioner' is used to encompass all adults who work with children in preschool settings, to reflect the range of qualifications and requirements in different countries. The term 'teacher' is used to denote adults who are qualified with a professionally recognised teacher training body, and work either in a preschool or primary school setting. The focus of this book is on qualitative enquiry and methods for working with children, and recognises that adults' roles incorporate playing, teaching, caring, researching and reflecting on their approaches and principles.

Given the ethical and participatory focus of the research approaches presented in this book, any definition of play should reflect children's perspectives and experiences. With these caveats in mind, much research is driven by adults' fascination with play, and the need to know more about what children do in their freely chosen activities, as well as the purposes those activities serve in children's learning and development, and in their peer cultures. Furthermore, the addition of 'educational play' has brought further challenges to framing and defining playful pedagogies because many national and international policy frameworks incorporate play as a process that is expected to produce specific learning outcomes. In other words, play has shifted away from being seen as the natural activity of childhood, defined by concepts of freedom – to choose, to roam, to express individual and group interests, and direct play for one's own purposes. Instead, play has been drawn into social, health and education policies in many countries to the extent that it is pulled in specific directions towards defined ends, sometimes with the means determined by adults. These contemporary contexts add to the complexity of researching play and using play-based or pedagogically appropriate research methods, because of the fuzzy boundaries between the researcher's and the children's play agendas.

In light of these complexities, where can we start when thinking about defining and framing play in order to design and carry out research?

The objectives for this chapter are:

1. To consider ways of defining and framing play.
2. To consider the significance of contexts for researching play and researching through play in education settings.
3. To understand three different modes of play as a means of framing research on playful pedagogies in different contexts.

WAYS OF DEFINING AND FRAMING PLAY

Although there are many ways of defining play and articulating its core characteristics and purposes, no single definition has been agreed upon (Wood, 2013). Sutton-Smith (1997: 4) takes an expansive overview of 'the great diversity of play phenomena', shown in the quote below, but argues that presenting these as a list has limitations because the boundaries between play forms and characteristics are never discrete:

> Mind or subjective play; solitary play; playful behaviours; informal social play; vicarious audience play; performance play; celebrations and festivals; contests, games and sports; risky or deep play. (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 4–5)

In each of these forms, play can be ambiguous. For example, children can structure social play with rules that are negotiated to set up and direct the play, the social hierarchies of who can lead or organise the play, and who can be included or excluded. Some play forms are spontaneous and involve the freedom to choose, and others, such as contests, games and sports, are highly structured with specific rules and rigorous training programmes for elite players. Because it is difficult to define play as observable activity, some researchers have proposed that it is a state of mind, a way of being, an orientation to life that involves not just the act of playing, but also being playful or being in a state of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Given the struggle to define play, it is important to understand children's perspectives in the contexts of their play lives. Generally, children agree that play is freely chosen, takes place in their own spaces (indoors and outdoors, homes, communities and education settings) and takes place without adults. In relation to playful pedagogies, children may choose to involve adults in their play, but adults' presence and roles should be as co-players, on the children's terms and respectful of their purposes. Thus, children's intentions and meanings are central to designing play-based research methods. Howe (2016) focused on the meanings and values that children attributed to play/self-initiated activity, as they made the transition from the Early Years Foundation Stage (the curriculum framework for children from birth to 5) to Year 1 of the National Curriculum (age 5 to 6) in England. Using photographs, drawings and conversations, Howe identified that children value play/self-initiated activity as a means of exercising choice and autonomy, pursuing their own interests, building social relationships with peers, and for relaxation, enjoyment and reward. However, their experiences of play shifted in the transition to Year 1, as pedagogical approaches became more teacher-directed. This study highlights the impact of changing contexts, teachers' roles and curriculum demands on children, all of which are relevant in countries that have developed curriculum frameworks that link preschool with compulsory education.

The task of defining and framing play is complex because play is a contested concept that is used for different purposes in different contexts. Furthermore, play forms, tools

and resources have changed over time, alongside children's material cultures, conceptions of childhood and how play is valued within different communities and societies. Digital or technological play has become widespread in recent years, and could be incorporated into any play forms and characteristics. The concepts of postdigital play (Marsh et al., 2019) and converged play (Wood et al., 2019) indicate no distinction between digital and traditional play because children move seamlessly across platforms and devices. However, as Wood et al. (2019) have argued, playful pedagogies that incorporate converged play are lagging behind children's engagement and competence with digital technologies. Therefore, stepping into the field of research on play demands that we are transparent about the theoretical and methodological lenses we are choosing, and for what purposes. In summary, the task of defining and framing play encompasses:

- Academic definitions based on research from contrasting disciplinary perspectives.
- Children's perspectives and experiences.
- How play is framed within curriculum guidance and policy frameworks.
- Adults' perspectives in different contexts.
- Cultural and contextual perspectives.

The diversity of play phenomena noted by Sutton-Smith (1997) has implications for researching play and the range of play-based methods that might be used. Play has been researched over time from contrasting disciplinary perspectives. From the early nineteenth century, philosophical views positioned play as the natural activity and occupation of childhood that has many benefits – cognitive, social, affective, psycho-motor as well as therapeutic, spiritual and existential. A universal view of play was applied to young children and animals in relation to different functions such as learning, development, rehearsal, imitation, acquisition of behaviours for survival and success, preparation for maturity/adulthood, and many more (Sutton-Smith, 1997). In the 20th century, the scientific study of children produced new theories of learning and development from psychology and developmental psychology. The addition of neuroscience and new research technologies generated further understanding of the development, structure and functions of the brain, its circuitry and architecture (Anderson and Reid, 2016). As the focus shifted from exploring what play is, to what play is good for, scientific research established its beneficial effects for learning, development and well-being, and its therapeutic value. These effects have been demonstrated in the developmental domains – cognitive, social, affective and psycho-motor – and in subject areas such as literacy, mathematics, science and technology.

Play is also associated with learning-relevant processes such as self-regulation, metacognition, memory, attention and problem-solving (Robson, 2010; Whitebread et al., 2012). As a result, scientific research has gradually influenced public policy in education, health and social care, based on claims about the universal benefits of play for children

and families. Concepts from research about developmental ages and stages, categories and types of play, and various measures of the benefits of play, provided the scientific discourse of development proceeding in similar ways, but with some variations in the ages at which children progress through defined stages. However, developmental theories have been the focus of critique. In a historical review of research on children's play in an Australian indigenous context, Dender and Stagnitti note the limitations of this universal discourse, and challenge the deterministic view that all children play in the same or similar ways:

> It can be argued that play is situational, culturally contextual and socially constructed because play takes different forms in different cultures and some forms of play are discouraged or have a different emphasis in some cultural groups. (2015: 3)

Although Whitebread et al. (2012) acknowledge cultural variations in play, they document the progress from psychological perspectives to ECE curriculum frameworks, and the significant shift in the 20th century from demonstrating the value of play to informing education policies about its contribution to learning goals and outcomes. This shift also had implications for defining playful or play-based pedagogies, and for designing research methods.

Play is valued in many national early childhood curriculum frameworks (Roopnarine et al., 2018), often using normative and instrumental ways of defining and justifying play based on the concept of 'educational play'. In educational play, constructs such as play-based learning, curriculum and pedagogy are the foundations of practice, but have been interpreted in different ways in curriculum frameworks, and by practitioners. In a review of research on kindergarten teachers' concepts of play, Fesseha and Pyle (2016) propose that how play is defined depends on individual teachers' beliefs, how they use play and the roles they assume. Consistent with similar studies, they argue that while many kindergarten teachers support the use of play-based learning, how this is implemented lacks consistency and clarity (2016: 362). However, we argue that the focus on tensions between teachers' theories and practice obscures wider field-specific challenges for developing playful pedagogies, because competing influences are manifest in early childhood education settings. Early childhood policy frameworks influence provision for play, especially where the emphasis lies more towards adult-led rather than child-initiated play, and where adults set the learning goals that will achieve academic progression and school readiness (BERA-TACTYC, 2017). As Chesworth (2019: 5) has argued, these competing influences also draw attention to whose and what forms of knowledge are valued, and the problems of separating approved (curriculum) forms of knowledge and ways of knowing from children's interests and inquiries.

For all its status within early childhood education principles, theories and philosophies, providing evidence for the claims that are made about play remains problematic, specifically how play leads to specific goals and outcomes. In defining and framing play, we can see a pathway from understanding what play is, to what play does, to what outcomes play produces. As governments have increased policy attention and investment, the need to prove or demonstrate the educational effectiveness of play has intensified, which means that the relationship between playing and learning has been drawn into debates about appropriate or effective pedagogical approaches. Many early childhood curriculum frameworks determine what versions of play are acceptable in the pursuit of learning outcomes in order to create children who are 'school ready' at whatever age the transition to compulsory schooling takes place in different countries. Thus, from a policy perspective, curriculum discourses create and order what play is, what the playing child should be doing, and what play must produce. The desired practices and outcomes may value sameness rather than diversities, conformity rather than creativity, and may foreground adults' plans and purposes in ways that undervalue children's interests and choices.

Orderliness is reinforced in the transition to formal education in compulsory schooling where it is assumed that child-initiated play will be left behind, and children will benefit from 'formal' approaches, including adult-led activities and direct instruction. In contrast, Wood (2013) has argued that adults can plan for play to happen by providing resources, creating time and space for play, and responding to children's interests and inquiries. However, they cannot plan children's play because much of what happens, especially in social and pretend play, is spontaneous, fluid and in the moment.

Given these contemporary field-specific challenges, how can research capture the complexity and ambiguity of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997), and understand how play reflects curriculum goals and practitioners' pedagogical approaches? This question draws attention to the importance of designing research that is culturally and contextually informed, respects children's perspectives and experiences, and takes account of national policy frameworks as well as children's home and community experiences.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURES AND CONTEXTS FOR RESEARCHING PLAY

Although much has been written about the relationship between play, learning and development, we do not know precisely what the connecting processes or mechanisms are. However, we do know that these processes are social, affective, cognitive, embodied, relational, material and multi-modal. Far from being the natural occupation of childhood, play is socially and symbolically complex in its different forms and manifestations. What children choose to do in and with their play is varied and often unpredictable, which presents many challenges to researchers. Chesworth (2016, 2018) shows how play

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reveals insights into children's interests and funds of knowledge[1] which include their home and family practices. Therefore, play is one of many ways in which children learn and develop, but its significance seems to lie in the distinctive contexts and characteristics that distinguish playfulness and playful activities from other forms of activity. Play in preschool and community settings also offers children opportunities for social and co-operative play with children of different ages, cultures and heritages (Broadhead, 2009; Chesworth, 2019), thereby providing distinctive contexts for researching through play.

There is broad agreement that play encourages exploration, experimentation and problem-solving, and enables children to follow their interests and inquiries. Over time, children's choices reveal important questions and processes of sustained inquiry, and the motivation to become more skilled and knowledgeable about their social, cultural and material worlds (Hedges and Cooper, 2016). However, learning is not just about acquiring and storing new knowledge or skills: many factors and processes coalesce in play, and the purposes vary according to who is playing, in what contexts, and with what materials, tools and resources. Therefore, it is difficult to identify what play leads to in terms of defined outcomes, because play is a mash-up of children's cultures and heritages, knowledge, skills and understanding, all of which contribute to the development of their play-based peer cultures and identities.

Sociological and anthropological research focuses on children's peer cultures, particularly their social relationships, rules, routines and meanings, and their interactions with their material cultures (Chesworth, 2018). Children are active in the co-construction and development of their play; learning through play incorporates learning about play, and what it means to be a player. Children's interests extend beyond curriculum goals, and incorporate relationships, morals and ethics; existential matters of life, death and dying; the natural world; the social world, safety and risk; technologies and popular culture; and developing their identities (Hedges and Cooper, 2016; Hill and Wood, 2019). In other words, play may be both a mirror that reflects children's social and personal interests and knowledge, and a motivating force for directing further learning.

Sociological and anthropological research indicates the importance of understanding play from children's perspectives, distinct from adults' perceptions and values. Such research typically involves deep ethnographic immersion, which may be as an adult participant in children's play lives, or a non-participant observer (Hill, 2015). Digital methods – cameras, videorecorders – may be used to capture events as they happen, and to stimulate discussions with children about their play, as well as with practitioners and family members (see Part 3, Chapters 7–12 for more examples). Choices have to be made about which children are the focus for research, and/or which specific areas (such as role play, small-world play, outdoor play). Following a child or children through their free-flow

[1]Accumulated knowledge and ways of being based on cultural and social experiences

play activities is fascinating but methodologically demanding in terms of observing and recording, and will always provide in-the-moment challenges to our ethical responsibilities towards participants.

For example, Chesworth (2016, 2018) used video recordings of play to explore the perspectives of children (age 4–5), parents and teachers in an early years classroom in England. Over an eight-month period, the video recordings acted as a provocation through which to explore the participants' perspectives as they selected episodes of play to watch and respond to during the researcher's visits to the classroom and to the children's homes. The children's responses to the recordings were enacted in multiple modes, requiring a research design that was responsive to the diverse and fluid ways in which they chose to participate. Allowing time and space for children to exercise choices regarding when, where and how they engaged in the research became a key consideration. Sometimes children gave 'running commentaries' as they viewed the recordings; on other occasions, these stimulated conversations with friends and family members. Children also used non-verbal modes of expression to communicate their responses. Therefore, whilst Chesworth's research highlights the possibilities afforded by digital methods, it also draws attention to the importance of respectful, responsive relationships between the researcher and the participating children (see Chapters 2, 3 and 4 for more). Such relationships are foundational to reflexive research which is attuned to the multiple modes and contexts in which children might choose to communicate their perspectives of play.

These contrasting theoretical and methodological orientations are significant in play research because it is important to understand the ways in which they structure a project and produce a particular discourse in which certain kinds of knowledge about play, and about children and childhood, are foregrounded. Therefore, our own position on framing and defining play is important in terms of the chosen focus, aims, methodology, methods and ethical orientations. The following section focuses on researching play in education settings and proposes three modes of play as a way of understanding playful pedagogies.

THREE MODES OF PLAY FOR FRAMING RESEARCH

As noted previously, embedding play in early childhood curriculum policies and frameworks has produced a distinctive form of 'educational play' within which the concept of playful pedagogies may be understood in different ways. However, educational play is not as straightforward as policy-makers assume. This means that implementing playful pedagogies creates challenges for practitioners/researchers, even where curriculum frameworks incorporate child-initiated and adult-led play. Exploring the interface between play and pedagogy, Wood (2014) identified three modes of play to indicate the choices that practitioners can make in order to respect children's choices and interests and meet learning goals in the curriculum.

MODE A: CHILD-INITIATED PLAY

Child-initiated play has distinctive qualities based on children's freedom to choose activities, resources and co-players, and opportunities to direct their play. Within education settings, there will always be some constraints on freedom (such as risk and safety, resources, space and time), but the freedom to choose creates potential for complex activities. Children reveal their emerging interests, needs, dispositions and patterns of learning, with interests becoming the springboard for child-led inquiries that may be sustained over time and in different contexts (Hedges, 2019). In Mode A, children's purposes and meanings are foregrounded, and incorporate their multimodal communicative practices.

The following episode, from Chesworth's (2015) research, focuses upon freely chosen play in an English early years classroom. Daniel, Peter and Tom, all 4 years old, have used wooden blocks to construct a spaceship. The following extract is from a conversation with Daniel and Peter whilst watching the video recording of the play:

CONVERSATION BETWEEN DANIEL AND PETER

Daniel: (*pauses the film, moves close to the screen*) Ah, well that was my game phone. And it can tell me messages about aliens and space monsters.

Peter: Game phone, Dan?

Daniel: (*nodding*) Yep. It was a brick that was my phone.

Peter: Ah yes, and you said there was a bomb heading for the spaceship. (*eyes wide, hands held up with fingers stretched*)

Daniel: Yes. It … was … going … to … crash. (*long pause, grave expression, turns to look at the researcher*) There was going to be a massive explosion. And then it went fast with bombers even chasing it. We turned it back around and went Bang! Bang! Bang! (*fists clenched, voice animated*) It went on a while and then the bombers, well they exploded. (*smiles*)

Peter: Exploded, yeah they exploded. Boom! (*very loud voice*)

The interests children explore in their play draw upon multiple funds of knowledge, and in this example Daniel's and Peter's shared familiarity with everyday technology was interwoven with their knowledge of plotlines from popular culture involving aliens, space monsters and explosions. The brick-that-was-a-phone could hence be ascribed with more-than-everyday properties from which Daniel was able to announce the imminent arrival of a bomb. This episode constituted a merging of everyday experiences, popular culture and humour in which the children's play embodied a multi-layered reconstruction of familiar cultural scripts. Daniel's and Peter's play

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highlights the potential complexity associated with freely chosen play that is not constrained by predetermined outcomes.

MODE B: ADULT-GUIDED PLAY

Adult-guided play can intersect with Modes A and C, and is described by Walsh et al. (2011) as 'playful structure' because the goals are responsive to children's interests, as demonstrated in Mode A, and reflect curriculum goals. The degree of structure may differ according to the goals within curriculum frameworks, including the immediate goals identified by practitioners, and the longer-term outcomes that they are expected to deliver or work towards. Mode B indicates the different ways in which the play–pedagogy interface can integrate children's and practitioners' purposes. Pedagogical interactions may include co-playing with children, guiding, facilitating, stepping in and stepping out of the play in ways that are responsive to children's requests, but do not direct or re-direct the play. These processes enable children to move from exploration and discovery – 'What does this do?' – to inquiry and knowledge creation – 'What can I do with this'?

The following excerpt is taken from Hill (2015), whose research focused on children's peer cultures, and how their interests were expressed in self-initiated play. Her methods included videotaped episodes of play, observations, and reflective conversations with the children (aged 5–6 years) and their parents. The children had been following shared interests in death and dying, and in this episode they reveal their fundamental interests and inquiries (Hedges and Cooper, 2016), their ongoing questions, as well as everyday and scientific knowledge.

THE DEAD NEWT

13th March. After Outdoor Learning at approx. 9.30am

Field notes from a conversation

The children begin each day playing outside in an area that includes access to a small garden with a pond. A group of children find a dead newt in the garden, and as they come in three children, Lucia (aged 4 years 11 months), Peter (aged 5 years 6 months) and Adam (aged 5 years 6 months), begin telling me about it at the same time, talking over each other excitedly. I stop them and ask how they know the newt was dead.

Lucia: It had its eyes open and I don't think it was sleeping.

Peter: People can die with their eyes open.

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Lucia: Sometimes they can die with their eyes closed or open.

Adam: (indignantly) Or half open.

Lucia: If they are dead they don't move.

Adam: They go to heaven.

Peter: People believe in it but that's where they stay alive, where the skeletons are.

Adam: They die on earth and then they go to heaven where they started.

Peter: I've got a book about digging up the past. The skeletons stay on earth and dirt goes on top.

Michelle: So skeletons stay on earth?

Adam: No. They go to heaven.

Source: Hill (2015: 159)

This episode prompts critical questions about how practitioners might respond to children's emerging scientific knowledge and inquiries. Sometimes it is appropriate to listen and note rather than intervene so that children's interests and inquiries can be followed up through group work and activities that are co-constructed between children and adults. However, this complex pedagogical approach is not always facilitated by curriculum frameworks with specific learning outcomes and a school-readiness agenda. Because practitioners may not have the time to observe and understand children's play, they may miss valuable learning opportunities. The more closely the adults' intentions are foregrounded, the less scope there is for play and playfulness, for children's purposes and meanings, and for pedagogical responsiveness.

MODE C: TECHNICIST/POLICY-DRIVEN

In Mode C, play is used to promote specific ways of learning in line with curriculum frameworks. Practitioners guide play activities in instrumental or directive ways, with adults' rather than children's goals and intentions in mind, and with little choice or flexibility. Mode C incorporates 'formal' pedagogical approaches, consistent with the expectations in some curriculum guidance documents. For example, in England, the expectation is that child-initiated approaches will be phased out in the Early Years Foundation Stage, with more teacher-led approaches being introduced to prepare children for formal learning in the National Curriculum. In Mode C play is not valued for its own sake, but for what it produces in terms of outcomes and the transition to formal learning.

In considering these three modes, it is important to understand their contrasting pedagogical orientations as a continuum. Hedges and Cooper (2016) argue that teachers are constantly making judgements about children's varied and often unpredictable interests and their implications for learning and curriculum. However, their freedom to act on those judgements may be constrained by a range of factors, including how play is positioned in the curriculum. Sometimes it is appropriate to teach children specific skills, for example playing a game with rules, or learning the skills to access and use digital technologies. Children may choose activities that are more like work because they enjoy using and applying their subject knowledge in ways that can be creative and playful. Children can also be directive in teaching each other skills or communicating knowledge in the context of play. In Modes B and C, practitioners can build on the significant content knowledge they have observed in Mode A, in ways that support progression in learning and respect children's ways of knowing and their diverse cultural knowledge. Responsive pedagogical approaches enable practitioners to move across adult-initiated and child-initiated activities in ways that:

- Build on children's interests and freely chosen activities.
- Connect interests with curriculum goals.
- Recognise and incorporate children's everyday working theories and their funds of knowledge into Modes B and C.
- Value children's ways of knowing and constructing sense and meaning from experience.

In light of these different pedagogical modes, it is also important for researchers to consider who the players are, what choices they are making in their play activities, and whose meanings and interpretations are being privileged in the analysis. Using reflective feedback from children, practitioners and family members can add depth to research, especially in culturally diverse communities where the subtlety of meanings may not be immediately visible. For example, 3-year-old Fatima is of Libyan heritage and has been attending a nursery setting in an English city for two years. Observations over a four-month period revealed that Fatima spent a lot of her time at nursery in the malleable materials area. We regularly noticed Fatima using her hands to pull, squeeze and flatten the Play-Doh. She also used rolling pins and cookie cutters to manipulate and make patterns in the dough. Fatima's keen interest in Play-Doh and other malleable materials could be interpreted as a repetitive behaviour from which she derived enjoyment in exploring familiar resources. However, reflective conversations with Fatima's mother enabled a deeper interpretation of the meaning of the activity in relation to Fatima's participation in household practices. Fatima's mother explained that she and her older sister frequently observe and assist with food preparation in the family kitchen. In particular, Fatima often helps to prepare the daily flatbread, a process that involves

manipulating the dough in much the same way that we had watched her squeezing, flattening and rolling the playdough at nursery. Fatima's mother was therefore able to interpret her daughter's play interests in relation to everyday social and cultural practices. Such an interpretation highlights the potential for funds of knowledge to offer an alternative lens through which to interpret Mode A in freely chosen play and to inform teachers' decision-making in Modes B and C.

Although we have argued that defining and framing play remains a challenge, the diversity of play phenomena has implications for how to go about researching play. The examples presented in this chapter show that it is possible to take a microscopic view of one child, or a telescopic view of children playing socially in different contexts.

The following questions are useful in thinking about framing your own research:

1. What are the contexts in which children are playing, and how do contexts influence their choices, actions and decisions?
2. What are the pedagogical roles of teachers and adults in the setting?
3. How might the three modes of play influence the choices you make about research questions and methods when looking at play in preschool and school settings?
4. How have you considered the cultural appropriateness of framing and defining play, and of your choices of research methods?
5. What and who is included or excluded in your research, what can be communicated or spoken, and whose voices and silences come forth in play?

Whatever methods are chosen, they will provide a snapshot of play at a particular moment in time. Once captured, either through texts, digital images, or drawings, that moment is taken to present and represent something fundamental about play, and about the context – whether from children's or adults' perspectives. It is important not to see data as truths but as a cumulative construction of interpretations that present a cultural narrative in which different readings are possible and desirable (see Part 2, Chapters 4–6 for more). These ethical perspectives remind us that play is the private space within which children enact and experience their childhoods in unique and creative ways. In contrast, research on play will always seek to make children and their play known and knowable to adults, through adults' discourses, narratives, categories and measures. When looking at playful pedagogies, or educational play, critical reflection incorporates questions about what forms of order we impose on the fluid and apparently chaotic nature of play, and for what/whose purposes?

CONCLUSION

In the following chapters, you will engage with different ways of thinking about research on play and through play, using different methods and theories, all underpinned by close attention to ethics and reflection. By engaging with research on play, you will develop the skills to analyse the values, positions and assumptions that may (or may not) be conveyed by the authors. Although the task of defining and framing play remains a challenge, articulating your own choices is essential for setting the focus and boundaries of your research. You need to reflect critically on how you are positioned historically and culturally, and the version of play you privelege – whether romantic and idealised, critical and disruptive, or policy-compliant. As researchers we are always steeped in cultural and historical narratives, but reflexivity enables us to be mindful of what we are reproducing, legitimating or disrupting in our research (see Chapter 4 for more). Given that play is embedded in many policy frameworks and curriculum guidance documents, it is also important to be critical of what versions and forms of play are approved and how play has been drawn into different curriculum and pedagogical approaches as 'educational play'. The three modes of play can serve as a way of framing research questions about play and pedagogy in ECE settings. However, it is important to bear in mind that assumptions about ages and stages of play and about universal benefits and outcomes have limitations in complex and diverse socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, attention to diversities is significant for capturing the meanings, experiences and cultural knowledges that children bring to their play, and to appreciate their purposes and meanings.

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