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2022-06

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/352796

Kangas, J & Harju-Luukkainen, H 2022, Creating a Theoretical Framework for Playful Learning and Pedagogy : The Finnish Perspective. in H Harju-Luukkainen, J Kangas & S Garvis (eds), Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care : A Multi-theoretical perspective on research and practice. vol. 1, Early Childhood Research and Education: An Inter-theoretical Focus, no. 1, vol. 1, Springer International Publishing AG, pp. 195-208. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95512-0_14

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Published in: Harju-Luukkainen, H., Kangas, J., & Garvis, S. (2021). *Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care: A Multi-theoretical perspective on research and practice*. (Early Childhood Research and Education: an inter-theoretical focus). (Chapter 2). Springer.

Creating a Theoretical Framework for Playful Learning and Pedagogy - The Finnish Perspective

Kangas, Jonna & Harju-Luukkainen, Heidi

Abstract

In this chapter we create a framework around the concept of play as a multimodal attitude or experience in early childhood education. In the Finnish curriculum for ECE play is considered essential for learning and is supported with a systematic and goal-oriented approach to scaffold children into engaging in learning opportunities. Therefore, teachers create good preconditions for play, supervise it in a suitable way and ensure that each child gets an opportunity to participate in play according to their skills and capabilities. In this chapter we analyze the play and playful approach in the Finnish ECE with the help of content analysis of policy documents and previously published peer reviewed scientific papers. At the end of this chapter we present a theoretical framework of playful learning and pedagogy. This model is conducted through a meta-analysis of learning theories, theories of play and of the recent research literature. It is a tool for teachers and researchers to reflect their playful practices and contextualize the concept of play in the context of education.

1. Introduction

The Finnish education system has received a lot of attention during the last decade. Partly due to the international PISA and other assessment success, but also due to somewhat unique educational assessment and pedagogical approaches. Even the Finnish method of playful learning have caught attention in international media. For instance Washington Post stated "*I have seen the school of tomorrow. It is here, in Finland*" and required more time for play for children (Strauss 2016). In Finland play is not considered as an extra-curricular educational activity, not something that you can add on into a day schedule. It is regarded as regular learning activity both in classroom and in outdoor environments (Harju-Luukainen, Garvis & Kangas 2019).

In the Finnish curriculum for ECE play is considered essential for learning and it is supported with a systematic and goal-oriented approach to scaffold children to engage in opportunities to learn. Therefore teachers must secure preconditions for play, use playful guidance and support, and ensure that each child gets an opportunity to participate in play together with other children, according to their skills and capabilities. In Finland play is understood as an attitude, an approach and a whole way of looking at the world. This makes the concept of play in Finland to a multimodal attitude or experience (Sefton-Green & al. 2015). However, it is important to note that play alone is not learning. Some Nordic researchers have been claiming the concept "*playing, learning child*" to represent the early childhood education approach (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan 2008). Simultaneously, playful learning in the context of education raises the question of whether the Finnish education should or shouldn't be taken seriously and is children's play 'real' learning. In general, the Finnish policy documents regarding ECE are painting a serious image of play, full of requirements for teachers, school directors and above all – the children. At the same time

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there are no clear definition on play and learning, playful learning and play-based learning. All often used as synonyms in research papers and steering documents. Further, there are also no attempts to synthesize the different approaches in order to develop the practices and teacher's understanding of playful learning.

From these premises, we have decided to take a closer look at how play and playful learning is defined in the Finnish context. Firstly we use the Finnish national curriculum guidelines of ECE as our analysis framework. A synthesis of play and playful learning (concepts used in this chapter) are then formed with the help of a systematic content analysis of definitions of play and playful learning described in 16 different research papers. With the help of content analysis we aim in framing the Finnish affiliated researcher's perspectives on play and playful learning. As a conclusion of these two parts (theoretical frame and research results) we form a synthesis, a theoretical framework of playful learning and pedagogy. This model is conducted through a meta-analysis of learning theories, theories of play and of the recent research literature.

1.1. The foundations of the Finnish play and playful learning

The foundation of Finnish ECE as well the role of play in the education system is constructed based on Fröbel and Pestalozzi thoughts on pedagogy based on children's play and work (Berger 2000), where the materials, toys and the enabling environment is providing children active learning through self-directed activities or even free-play where teachers only interact through setting the environment and interrupting non-accepted behavior (Kangas & Brotherus 2017; Lindberg 2014). This kind of passive teaching adaptation takes place for example in Reggio Emilia method where teachers guide the learning through environment with non-direct interaction (Doff-Nufrio 2011). This is because learning itself is considered motivating and children should not be taught through set questions and answers (Dewey 1916). On the other hand the direct teaching where teacher explains and questions the set answers to ensure children are copying the expected pieces of knowledge is used in many countries. Bennet (2005) have identified the pre-primary tradition (e.g. Belgium, France, Ireland, UK, and the US) and the pedagogic tradition (e.g. Nordic countries and many parts of Central Europe). The pre-primary tradition aims on cognitive goals and 'readiness for school' through schoolification where the pedagogical tradition is emphasizing on agency and social development through play (see Bodrova 2008). Also the learning goals are defined through academic achievements in the pre-primary tradition whereas the pedagogical tradition focuses on holistic development and learning-to-learn skills through more varied objectives than only set results (Kangas & al. 2019). This can be seen of instance in the introduction of the Finnish National curriculum guidelines for ECE as following '*the purpose … is to create equal preconditions the holistic growth, development and learning of the children...*' (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018, 9).

In Finland the National Curriculum for ECE (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018) do not provide exact learning goals or set of academic or practical skills. The learning is emphasized strongly in the curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018) in the *General Goals* and in the *Planning and Implementing Pedagogical Activity*. The national core curriculum (2018) is based on a conception of learning according to which children grow, develop and learn in interaction with other people and the immediate environment. Learning is holistic and occurs everywhere. It combines knowledge, skills, actions, emotions, sensory perceptions, bodily experiences and thinking. (Finnish National Agency for Education

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2018). Among other things, learning occurs when children observe and examine their surroundings and as they imitate the actions of others (Kangas & al. 2019; Karpov 2005). Children also learn by playing, moving, exploring, working on different assignments and expressing themselves as well as through activities based on arts (Harju-Luukkainen & al. 2019). In Finnish ECE the previous experiences of children, their interests, and their competences are the starting point for learning (see Kumpulainen 2018). The National curriculum guidelines (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018) describes notions about play in the context of learning by making statements about the role of play to be significant for the learning in early years. Play is described to be motivating and bringing joy; thus it also gives opportunities to learn many skills and acquire knowledge. New knowledge and skills learned by children are connected to their developing competences as well as the world they experience and their cultural backgrounds (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018). In these the process or interpretative reproduction where children interpret the knowledge, test it through their developing skills and make joint-meanings and reproduce the understanding through creative methods are essential (Repo & al. 2019; Corsaro 2011). Children are learning effectively when they are feeling well and secure, and positive emotional experiences and interactive relationships promote learning. Motivation and children's interest towards learning is considered essential and the National curriculum guidelines state that 'interesting, goal-oriented and suitably challenging activities inspire the children to learn' (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018). The socio-pedagogical and holistic approach (Bennett 2005) is combined with individual learning paths, and a child is entitled to gain experiences of success and joy in his or her actions and of themselves as a learner. Personal experiences and initiatives are meaningful in the learning process (see Kangas & Lastikka 2019).

1.2. The theoretical foundations of play in Finnish ECE

Internationally the discussion on both theoretical and practical field raised questions if it is possible to learn through play and what could teachers do to support and scaffold that learning. Further, scholars and policy makers have made statements for and against the playful learning approach in ECE. For instance Bodrova (2008) analyzed the pre-primary traditions of ECE programs in different countries and showed the limitations regarding time and space for pretend play activities. This tradition of 'schoolification' can be seen (from a Finnish perspective) as a threat for children's natural development. Also OECD has expressed concerns on the risk of too much emphasis on formal teaching and other 'schoolification' aspects of the ECE and further stressed that play should not been seen as competing with academic learning but rather as enhancing it (see Bodrova 2008; Christie & Roskos 2006). More generally play and especially playful learning could be understood as practical solutions of '*those aspects of curriculum that contribute to the well-being and involvement of the child'* (Kangas & al. 2019, see also Bennett 2005; Rainio 2010).

Play can be viewed from several perspectives. Play is for instance an important space for optimal acquisition of social skill. In play children feel the ownership towards the action and dares to take risks to perform on a higher skill level. This social acquisition is understood through the zone-of-proximal development (Vygotsky 1976), where children act and interact in their personal skills level and above it. In peer-related activity each participating child adapts the degree of difficulty to the right level, where play is performed on this proximal level of development in communication, academic, motor and process skills (see also Kangas & al. 2019; Hakkarainen & Bredikyte 2010; Lautamo 2012). Further, play is also understood as a part of children's culture and activity (Corsaro 2011) and has an intrinsic value to those

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who are involved in the play. Play is also described as children's natural and spontaneous activity (Vygotsky 1976). However the assessing and evaluating learning or performance is considered difficult, even meaningless to those, often adults, who are observing it from the outside (Kangas & al. 2019). Bondioli (2001) states that if play is understood as a "*spontaneous and self-motivated activity*" (p. 111) while the learning is resilient it is a great risk that the motives and thus the outcomes of play are generally overlooked. The dualistic understanding of learning as serious and important and play as rewarding and fun have been criticized by many researchers globally. The well-known featuring of learning by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defines the learning through concept of flow where the learning takes place in interaction with the perceived environment as playful and exploratory means and is self-reinforcing and enjoyable (see Hoffman & Novack 1997).

Play is described to be dynamic and dialogical process in an imaginary environment (Møller 2015). From multidiscipline approach play has multimodal natures of form in different societies (Whitebread & al. 2012). It can be claimed that in Finnish society and the context of ECE play have modalities such as learning activity, element of fun and playful communication, adaptations to active learning through tactile and kinesthetic activities where children are doers, makers and reproducers of learning (see Kangas & al. 2019; Harju-Luukkainen & al. 2019). This multimodal and multi-sensorial approach comes close to Dewey's (1939) idea of *learning by doing* where children are interacting with their environment through hands-on activities. Further on learning in ECE in Finnish context is valued through the process of active adaptation and exploration of environment through creative activities. The Finnish curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018) addresses both the learning and the play as key elements of the operational culture and educational practices but fails to bring them together. Thus the concept of playful learning remains vague and distant from the policies and practices of early childhood education (see. Kangas & al. 2019; Sefton-Green & al. 2015).

2. Data and methods

In this paper we used 1) Finnish curriculum guidelines for ECEC (2018) and 2) 16 scientific papers and doctoral theses (marked with * in table 1) as data, describing the definitions of play and playful learning in the Finnish early childhood education both in theory and practice. These documents were all published between 2010-2020 in recognized international scientific journals, peer evaluated book chapters or by universities as doctoral theses. In all of them play, playful or play-based was mentioned in connection with early childhood education as a keyword or some of the words were emphasized in the abstract. In order to identify as many research papers in this area as possible Google Scholar and Scopus searches were made. From these papers those that were affiliated with any Finnish university were chosen for further analysis. This in order to have a Finnish 'affiliated' perspective with this research.

In order to form a synthesis about play and playful learning in the Finnish early childhood education we decided to use systematic content analysis as our method. Content analysis from literature serves in this study is as a research-orienting tool following the valid inferences by analysing and identifying gaps, values, directions, or intersections within the broader research scope and ground future research trajectories (Khirfan, Peck & Mohtat 2020; Elo & Kyngäs 2008). With this method our aim was to provide meta data and contextual understanding regarding the concept of play. Our analysis was conducted in a few steps. In the first step of our analysis we framed how play is defined in the in the Finnish curriculum guidelines for

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ECEC (2018), since this would work as a baseline for our further systematic content analysis and finding the sub-categories from the peer reviewed papers. In Finland the curriculum is obligatory steering document for the context and quality of ECE. In the Finnish curriculum guidelines (2018) there were to be found five notion categories regarding play as following:

> *"The national core curriculum for early childhood education and care is based on a conception of learning according to which children grow, develop and learn in interaction with other people and the immediate environment. The conception of learning is also based on a view of the child's active agency."* (p. 33).

We used these five notion categories (*growth, development, learning, interaction* and *active agency)* as our frame for our further systematic content analysis of scientific papers. Leedy and Ormrod (2001, 155) describes content analysis as '*a detailed and systematic examination of the content of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes or biases*'. We analysed the content of the chosen scientific papers and doctoral theses in order to find 'junks of meaning' regarding the definition of play, playful learning and play-based learning. After this these junks of meaning where then categorized under the five notions from the Finnish curriculum guidelines and these 'junks of meaning' formed the so-called sub-categories (see table 1 closer). This was done in order to be able to get a broad view of the concept of play and to define closer how Finnish affiliated researchers contextualize the playful learning. Content analysis in general is advantageous for understanding the social and cultural reality of multifaceted, phenomena like play and playful learning (Khirfan, Peck & Mohtat 2020), which in case of this chapter, overlaps childhood, developmental psychology, education, teacher training and professional development and curriculum development among others.

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3. Results - Framing play and playful learning in Finnish ECE

In this section we will be present our results by framing how play is defined in the Finnish ECE context and by Finnish affiliated researchers. The notion categories were formed from the Finnish curriculum guidelines (2018) and the sub-categories were formed from scientific papers and doctoral theses. All these are described closer in table 1.

Table 1. *Notion categories, sub-categories and author identification to each sub-category. (*doctoral dissertation)*

Notion categories	**Sub-categories**	**Author identification to sub-category**
Growth	Wellbeing & care Motor development ('being big enough') Closeness and togetherness	Kalliala 2011 Rutanen 2012 Hännikäinen 2018
Development	Developmental affords Play development Occupation	Hyvönen 2011 Hakkarainen & Bredikyte 2010 Lautamo 2012*
Learning	Reaching the pre-set goals Learning environment Academic (language) learning Academic (science) learning	Piispanen & Meriläinen 2015 Lindberg 2014* Kesäläinen, Suhonen, Alijoki & Sajaniemi 2019 Vartiainen & Kumpulainen 2020
Interaction	Co-operation Joint play with teachers Sense of community	Syrjämäki, Pihlaja & Sajaniemi 2018 Pursi & Lipponen 2019 Koivula & Hännikäinen 2017
Active agency	Agency Participation & Influence Making initiatives	Rainio 2010* Leinonen, Brotherus & Venninen 2014 Kangas & Lastikka 2019

Notion of Growth. In this category play researches focuses on the wellbeing and physical growth of human being. Kalliala (2011) gives examples of toddlers wellbeing through '*being visible*' and criticizes the paradigm of child as a competent member of society: '*…the child as eager to learn, competent and strong in some respects but, at the same time, vulnerable, immature and needy in other*s' (p. 239). Thus Kalliala (2011) draws patterns of nurturing children's wellbeing through sensitivity and care of teachers as a pedagogical tool. Wellbeing in play and education have often explained through care as provider of wellbeing. For example, Rutanen (2012) have shown, that children under three years are often experiencing invisible limits and barriers in Finnish ECE to protect them from physical harm. Hännikäinen (2018) approaches the wellbeing from the perspective of togetherness and describes children happiness when '*educator was close by, listening to and talking with them*' (p. 152). Kalliala (2011) explains that dilemma between play and care is that within free play children are abandoned to survive in the social interaction without direct support from teachers and children cannot obtain their wellbeing on their own. More generally this dualistic approach towards play and learning becomes visible in the category called *Notion of Growth* in Finnish ECE. On one hand, children are growing naturally but on the other hand they are small and vulnerable and require care from staff to experience wellbeing.

Notion of Development. In this category the Finnish ECE is viewed through socialization process, mainly through being and belonging and where children are developing their identity, skills, and interests. The development exists also as an entity 'taking its natural course'. However in her research Hyvönen (2011) frames the developmental areas of play as affording within the educational settings in ECE. She

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points out that these developmental areas are co-created between children and teachers, not taught or guided by the teacher. The development is afforded when the play and teacher's role is affording in a process play which '*is understood as a learning activity as a process with distinct phases of orientations, playing and elaborating'* (p. 59) In process play the development of especially cognitive and emotional aspects were shown to be strong and because the process was understood to be more important than the product, children changed to adapt the play within their personal competence level (Hyvönen 2011). Further, Hakkarainen and Bredikyte (2010) gave strong foundations of play as tool for development '*Play development…has been superior route to higher-level executive functions and self-regulation compared to all direct training programs'* (p. 58). According to our results the category *Notion of Development* in Finnish ECE is based on social situation of development theory created by Vygotsky (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte 2010). Finally, development can be seen through the play as occupation of children (Lautamo 2012) '*when we see play as an occupation, we can assume that participation in play is essential to children's feeling of competence, occupational identity and well-being'* (p. 16). Further, the play performance could be evaluated through these occupational factors and enhance the valuation of play.

Notion of Learning. In the *Notion of Learning* category researchers bring forward the meaning of the curriculum as well as didactical basis of ECE in language, science, math and arts. The learning notion is strongly visible also in discourses about learning environment. Lindberg (2014) claims that enabling physical space for learning is not only for offering new affordances for children to perceive, but also to enable the use of material elements important for the children. Also Piispanen & Meriläinen (2015) refer learning as reaching pre-set goals through '*good planning…gives pupils freedom to play individually and creatively but still along the lines of the goals'* (p. 233). Learning as notion is brought forward through focusing the learning in Finnish ECE settings as not learn the subject content as such but as being able to create understanding about contents by linking it with experiences (Piispanen & Meriläinen 2015). Learning is explored through play in the context of language learning by Kesäläinen & al (2019) and of science learning by Vartiainen and Kumpulainen (2020). In learning through play the emphasis is on the role of children as active producers and users of knowledge, where the focus of learning is beyond demonstrating what is known (Vartiainen & Kumpulainen 2020). The language learning was strengthened within the context of social play where children did report enjoyment, interaction and participation with peers (Kesäläinen & al. 2019). Within the *Notion of Learning* category in the contexts of academic learning the children were able to engage themselves in problem-solving and meaning-making situations through play and playful activities with tools and toys as referring to Dewey's learning by doing ideology (Vartiainen & Kumpulainen 2020; Kesäläinen & al. 2019).

Notion of Interaction. The *Notion of Interaction* category is considered in many play and playful learning approach-oriented researches, where play and learning are both understood as social meaning-making, but also as learning social and behavioural skills as continuum to Vygotsky's social learning ideas. According to our results, for this category the meaning of play was essential. In social situations play created shared context of understanding and further co-operation between children. Even though they very young toddlers they were '*able to organize their actions in concert with each other in order to build shared understanding and sustained co-participation*' (Pursi & Lipponen 2019, p. 109). The role of teacher as a mediator was identified as key element of successful co-operation and peer interaction in play with children with special needs (Syrjämäki, Pihlaja & Sajaniemi 2018). With joy and playful communication the play

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connection i.e. children resilience towards play was also increased (Pursi & Lipponen 2019). A longitudinal research by Koivula and Hännikäinen (2017) showed the construction of the sense of community through continuous play activities. Through these children learned negotiations and influencing skills together with emotional expression and we-talk. They state that children constructed belonging through joint activities and negotiate the rituals and routines of the group, and experienced inclusion, caring and togetherness (Koivula & Hännikäinen 2017).

Notion of Active agency. Participation and agency are meaningful to learning and motivation in the context of Finnish ECE (The National curriculum guidelines 2018). Rainio (2010) brings the question of children's agency and participation within the play and playful experience further. In agentive approach learning and development are connected through the experiences of '*be taken seriously and spaces to be offered to it in different areas of social life*' (p. 96). Very close to the concept of agency is children's participation in ECE setting. It has been noted how children are learning self-esteem and skills for practical democracy in playful actions in classrooms (Leinonen, Brotherus & Venninen 2014). The multidimensional concept of agency aspects of learning becomes visible in play for examples in skills to control oneself, to act and to become conscious of oneself and the world (Rainio 2010). Within this category also children's initiatives towards learning and classroom practices becomes important. Kangas and Lastikka (2019) have shown how children's initiatives in play have a crucial role in learning and motivation, especially in play related activities where children felt '*they are capable and able to learn new skills*' (p. 33).

4. Conclusions - Creating a framework for playful learning and pedagogy

A challenge on the field of research regarding play and playful learning is that there have not been done any synthesis of the theoretical background or pedagogical practices during the last decade. The definition of play and playful approaches have therefore been vague. A challenge in trying to synthesize this area is the fact that the definition of play and playful learning can be viewed from several standpoints. Therefore this paper is a first attempt to describe the definitions of play and playful learning in Finnish early childhood education and give it a framework. In order to achieve this aim we used systematic content analysis as our method and analysed 16 scientific papers and doctoral theses and used the Finnish curriculum guidelines as our analysis frame.

As a result of this content analysis, we claim that the Finnish understanding and practices of play and playful learning are constructed through multidisciplinary understanding of research about learning as social, psychological and active learning paradigm. The influence of Vygotsky (1976) is clearly visible in the social acquisition to perform on a higher skill level (see also Vartiainen & Kumpulainen 2020; Kangas & al. 2019). On one hand the learning is understood to construct the meaning and multimodal roles of play but they are also multidimensional and evolving in the practice. This ideology reflects the understanding of learning as reproducing culture through active agency (see Corsaro 2011; Rainio 2010). Learning in Finnish ECE is understood through mastering knowledge and skills, taking actions, expressing emotions, making sensory perceptions and bodily experiences and, finally, thinking (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018). Through these multimodal and multi-sensorial adaptations the concept of learning comes close to Dewey's (1939) idea of learning by doing where children are interacting with their environment through

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hands-on activities. The social dimensions of learning are also strongly emphasized and Bardy (2001, p.125) summarizes that as following *'... to involve children in communities in a way that secures their learning process'*. Further, play in Finnish ECE is defined and understood through multidimensional values and roles. Play have an intrinsic value to those who are involved in the play (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018, 25). Especially important is the area of self-initiated play, which is also highlighted in curriculum guidelines. It is described as children's natural and spontaneous activity where they need support for joining in and care (see Kalliala 2011; Vygotsky 1976). On the other hand learning in play is highly valued and play is seen as path of socialization of human being where the areas of communication, social learning and problem-solving skills (Pursi & Lipponen 2019; Kangas & al. 2019; Koivula & Hännikäinen 2017; Whitebread & al. 2012). These social competences are requirement for successful play; thus play includes active carrying out of negotiations and agreements and is thus dynamic and dialogic process (Møller 2015). Further, play within ECE settings have an impact in relation to intentional learning, connected with effortfulness and involvement of problem-solving and creativity skills (Whitebread & al. 2012).

As a final conclusion for this study we created a framework of playful learning and pedagogy (figure 1). There are two stands that are affecting our understanding of playful learning in pedagogical practice. These are the theories related to learning and theories related to play, both of them evident in the pedagogical practice. However, these have not been integrated in the pedagogical practices on a theoretical level previously. This framework of playful learning and pedagogy highlight the teachers' role, their understanding of play and learning, children's needs and the output or interaction where teachers enable, control, interact and finally play with children. The role of a teacher is to mediate in the development of children's motives for play (Karpov 2005). The conclusion can be drawn that play is not always learning and play is not initially a self-motivated activity, but the motives for playing – as well as learning - gradually develops in children (see also Kangas & al. 2019; Hakkarainen & Bredikyte 2010; Kalliala 2011).

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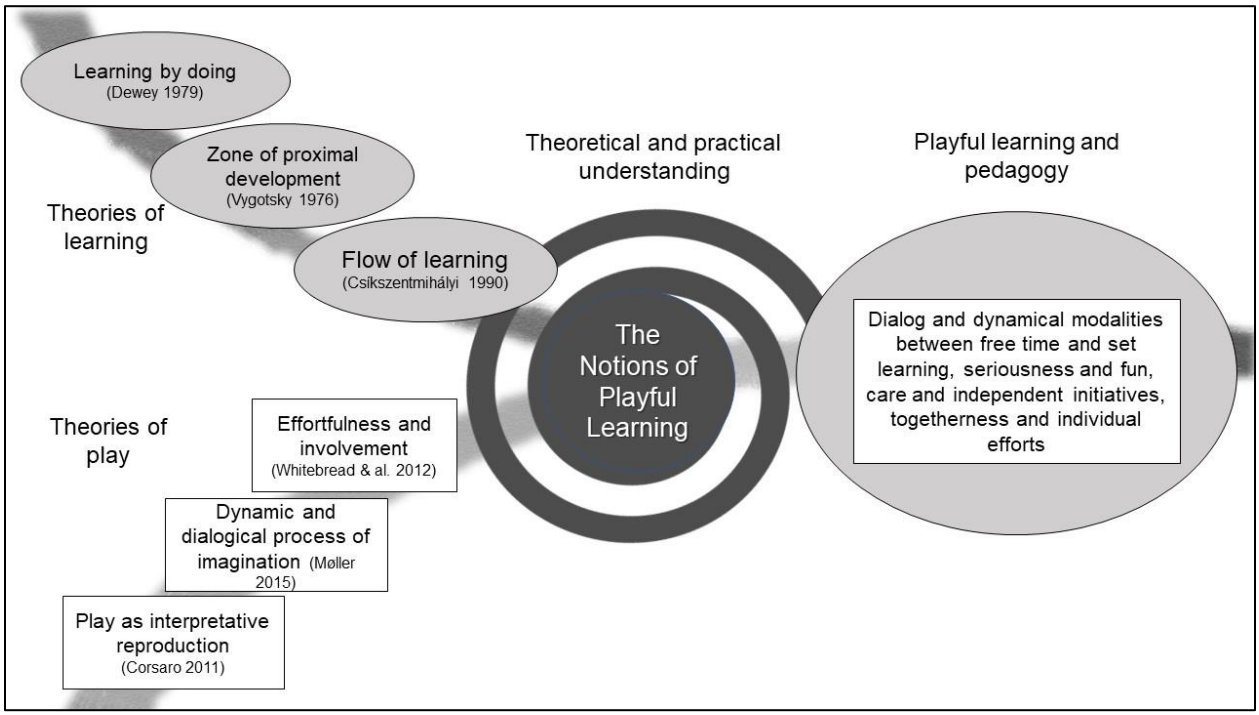


Figure 1. A theoretical framework of playful learning and pedagogy

To understand the framework of playful learning and pedagogy we need to understand the role of pedagogy as a scaffolding activity where observation, interaction, support and guidance from teacher are crucial. Pedagogical play refers to the use of play in ECE in promoting the learning of young children (Wood 2010; Sefton-Green & al. 2015). Pedagogical play means also designing and planning the educational activities following curriculum goals through playful activities and communication (Kangas & al. 2019). Skills such as enactment into learning activities through creativity and exploration or goal setting for learning through independent initiatives and choice making were shown to be developing in the context of playful learning environment with the playful pedagogy (Piispanen & Meriläinen 2015; Hyvönen 2011).

Further, in early childhood education it is necessary to understand the intrinsic value of play for the children as well as the pedagogical significance of play in learning and children's holistic growth and well-being. The playing learning child ideology (see Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson 2008) is seen in the centre of the ECE, and it states that all learning, interaction and everyday activities should be implemented through play because children will make everyday events of their life playful (see also Kangas & al. 2019; Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan 2008). Playful learning includes multimodal concepts or experiences, considered by Sefton-Green & al. (2015, p. 6) as *'an attitude, an approach and a way of looking at and interacting with the world'*. When framing the playful learning approach from conceptions and understanding of play and learning we are viewing play through modalities of learning and learning through the modalities of play. Within the different notions of learning the meanings and multitude practical approaches are framed for the use of educational policies and further on to the pedagogical practices of ECE.

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