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Needham, Martin  and Ülküer, Nurper (2020) A growing interest in early childhood's contribution to school readiness. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 28 (3). pp. 209-217. ISSN 0966-9760

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2020.1796416>

**Publisher:** Informa UK Limited

**Version:** Accepted Version

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/626705/>

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# Play and school readiness: Editorial

Nurper Ulkuer and Martin Needham

## **Introduction: A growing interest in early childhood's contribution to school readiness.**

James Coleman's report on equality and education published in the mid 1960s (Coleman, 1966) made a blunt statement that children, especially the "non-white children" in the USA were not enjoying equal opportunities in education, as they were not coming to school "ready". Reading the report now, the race and class bias in system is very apparent; it sought to compensate for the perceived Social-cultural-economic characteristics of the home and family environment that was emphasised as playing a decisive role in children's school achievement. The report concluded that in order for children to succeed in school, they needed to be prepared through pre-school programs, such as Head Start. The longitudinal success of the Head Start in USA reported by Weikart in the 1990's presented findings about long term situation on children who had participated in early education programmes (Gilford 2013). It showed improved school outcomes, improved career prospects, reduced social and health interventions in later life. This inspired many nations to invest more into early interventions and early childhood education, acquired a role, to "prepare" children for school in order to help them succeed. With greater investment has come increased scrutiny, control and revised expectations of quality in early education. Sure Start initiated in the UK in the late 1990's was an example of such political and pedagogical response towards achieving equality of education through early childhood education (Needham and Anning 2017). The longitudinal research legacy of both of these programmes emphasised the importance of the home learning environment together with access to a preschool pedagogy that balances both adult-lead and child-lead, play based learning (Schweinhart 2013 , Sylva et al 2010). Nevertheless, the neoliberal political legacies in the USA, UK and elsewhere often prefer to extend more school like experiences for children aged five and under (Sahlberg 2015; Moss and Urban 2020).

Encouraged by research, many nations have committed to the idea that children who attend Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) are more likely to be successful when they start school than those who do not (OECD 2017). Children's readiness for school is frequently cited among governments' motives for this investment in the early years sector. 'How children are prepared for school?' continues to be a keenly debated political question in international forums where early child development seems to be increasingly perceived as a preparation for primary school (United Nations, 2015). The Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), and Goal 4.2 in particular (United Nations 2015) establish Early Childhood Education (ECE) as a global target in order "to prepare" children for school and to ensure that they are ready as well as able to "learn". Calling for at least one year of pre-school education to be compulsory for all children, in all member states. UNICEF (2019) advocates the impact of quality pre-primary education on completion rates and more successful progress in literacy and maths skills in subsequent primary schooling. Governmental motives for this extension of provision are often linked to the belief that young children starting in education earlier, will give nations a competitive edge in the global market place (OECD 2017), but is starting 'schooling' earlier necessarily better? Or do we need to start re-thinking concepts and processes of "schooling and school readiness" differently?

## **The pressure ‘school readiness’ exerts on the place of play in ECE.**

Moss and Urban (2020) continue to report with concern the development of the International Early Learning and Child Well-being (IELS) as a standardised assessment for children at age 5. By paying considerable attention to literacy, numeracy and self-regulation they are concerned that it will add to existing pressures to standardise young children’s preschools who will be currently be experiencing very different learning contexts. Jane Murray (2020) in the opening editorial of the year for this journal drew attention to the limiting definitions of school readiness that focus on a limited range of skills with limited appreciation of how they interconnected with early experiences. There is an assumption contained within some views of school readiness that presenting preschool children with more school-like activities will help them to be more successful when they do start school (Anning 2010, Ellegaard and in this issue). Often school readiness is defined in relation to observable skills that the child is expected to demonstrate such as “sitting still in her desk, not talking before raising hands, able to recognize letters of alphabets, and counting up to 10. Children with these skills are considered “ready for school” (UNICEF 2019). Longitudinal studies of the influence of different preschool approaches, continue show that overly directive early education can reduce some children’s school achievements by undermining their confidence in their abilities in the skill areas that school demands (Schweinhart et al Sylva et al 2010). These studies suggested that at a balance between adult directed and child lead playful activities appeared to enable children to make a more successful start in schools. UNICEF’s first report on access to pre-primary education globally (2019) emphasised this view.

*If early education programmes take place in overcrowded or unstimulating environments, with curricula that are not suitable for young children, the gains individual children can make through their participation will be limited. In fact, poor-quality early childhood education can be potentially harmful through the overemphasis on testing or the use of inappropriate teaching methods. By reducing demand, low quality will also restrict efforts to achieve universal access. (UNICEF 2019)*

## **A broader view of school readiness**

School readiness can be used as a platform to highlight support for children’s social, emotional, language, and a wide range of communication skills, particularly to promote equity for children in ‘disadvantaged’ circumstances. This creates a much broader educational base for school subjects to build upon subsequently. Many argue that early education should remain a distinctive pre-primary phase matched to younger children’s interests and abilities rather the school curricular. ECE originated from the teachings of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, (Pound 2019) influenced by developmental psychologists such as Piaget (Burman 2008), and early interventionists such as Montessori (Giardiello 2014), these pioneers placed the child’s development at the centre pedagogical approaches. Early childhood educators viewed “play” as child’s way of exploring and understanding the world around themselves. They have valued free play, but also acknowledged the role of adult-led structured play in facilitating cognitive, language and social emotional development of the child. Their concern was not “learning” per se, but “the child’s holistic development” for lifelong learning. A founding principle of ECE was, and still is, that if children were

provided with opportunities to play, that were free, stimulating and developmentally appropriate she/he would develop well and acquire necessary cognitive, social and emotional skills for lifelong learning. “Play” in this context was the medium of this “holistic development” of the child. Learning on the other hand does not start later in life, but at birth, as the new-born begins exploring her environment through her senses by touching, smelling, tasting in a developmentally appropriate, nurturing environment (WHO 2015). More recently neuroscience studies (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000) have emphasised the importance of the first three years of life offering a window of opportunities that shape the brain architecture not only in terms of developing cognitive and language skills but also social-emotional skills. Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) suggest children’s brain architecture is shaped by “adult-child” interactions through play and communication in a style referred to as “serve and return” as in a table-tennis match. Such studies have widened the focus ECE interventions to include even earlier ages, starting with a strong emphasis on stimulation and play from birth. This approach, however, emphasizes need for strong child-parent interactions (primary caregiver) to build *social emotional ties* that form the foundation for child’s development including cognitive and language skills. This approach encourages the parents and other primary caregivers to follow the child’s lead rather than lead the child (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2004; Shonkoff 2009).

In the beginning early childhood education was not “concerned” with preparing the child to function in “primary school” but ensuring that child was developing her/his full potential through playful interactions with her/his immediate environment. ECE and Developmental programs were therefore designed to create environments that allowed children to play and learn in a free or in a semi-structured way, wherever the child happens to be:- home, neighbourhood, daycare, pre-school. The identification of “ECE” as being a sure way of preparing children for school, has turned some pre-schools into a “mini-primary schools” with a stronger emphasis on the “learning/teaching” of cognitive, language and mathematical skills. The notion of play can be lost in this drastic change of roles and expectations (Whitbread 2015). So, as several European nations move towards more literacy and numeracy orientated learning requirements of young children that demand practitioners’ attention ahead of play based learning (Wood and Hedges 2016), other nations such as China is introducing more play into the early years provision to promote creativity and independence (The Guardian 2015; Hu, Li, De Marco and Chen 2014).

This special issue reflects on the nature of play in the early years and how it supports school readiness. The papers illustrate how on the south-eastern and north-western sides of Europe there is an often tense relationship between play and more formal preparations for school. Two articles from Denmark discuss how a long established Kindergarten tradition, based around play and socialisation, are resisting pressures include more directed teaching. Three articles from Croatia highlight how play is seen as format that is supporting more child centred practices in preparing children for the transition to school.

Collectively these articles remind us while there may be similar vocabularies and broad aspirations in early childhood education, context is always important in discerning and realising meaning. We hope these articles help identify some of the common values shared and to appreciate the different challenges faced in applying them in context. We agree with Moss and Urban (2020) who support Nóvoa’s (2018) call for

“comparative studies to be part of a ‘science of difference’, an endeavour that should provoke thought by encounters with difference and recognition of the world’s rich diversity and complexity – a science, too, that should remind us that education is not primarily a technical endeavour (of standards and indicators, measurement and management) but a political endeavour about meanings, purposes, values and ethics” (Moss and Urban 2018 5).

In introducing this Special Issue we attempt to draw from both editors’ engagements with international policy on ECE. We will begin by reflecting on the case for play as an important element of preparing for school introducing some of the key concepts discussed in the articles that follow.

### **Theories advocating the importance of play in underpinning school readiness.**

Focused on the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2 (United Nations 2015) aiming to offer universal access to at least one year pre-school experience, UNICEF’s 2019 report acknowledges the statistical impact of pre-primary education on successful outcomes from primary education, especially for the children at risk of failing at school. It also points to the fact that children may not enjoy their rights to play freely and learn at their own interest and pace. This highlights tensions not only within the convention of the rights of the child (CRC), the Sustainable Development Goals but also with developmental theories and practices, which have long emphasized the importance of play in child’s development and learning.

*Pre-primary classrooms are not simply a downward extension of primary classrooms and schools – they are very different in terms of purpose, organization and function. Pre-primary education usually employs play-based, child-centred and active learning techniques to create a **nurturing learning environment**. Good pre-primary programmes foster and facilitate children’s holistic learning, including key social and emotional skills such as sharing, collaborating and managing feelings. This contrasts with what is often a more structured academic approach at the primary level. (UNICEF 2019 86)*

One might equally ask if current school and preschool models are the right thing to be preparing children for? How about the school “preparing” itself to child’s needs in primary school, where “play” is not considered as a means of learning? The UNICEF’s report also recommends that play should be part of the learning strategies of first grades of primary education, if not throughout. The Report further elaborates play activities for different age groups, including first grades of primary education, which is still considered as part of early childhood education as per definition of early childhood period, which, as per UN Convention of the Child Rights General Comment 7 (UNICEF 1989 GC7), extends from birth to 8 years of age (until child settles in her/his formal education). Considering that the first years of primary school are still part of early childhood, how play could be part of the process of development and learning. In other words, using “play” in preparing children for school, and the school for children could be effective if only the primary school curriculum and teachers do also “embrace” “play” as a means of helping child settling in her formal school.

So, why is play so important for early education? Theories of child development such as those advanced by Piaget, following developmental stages, identify several forms of play (Moyles, 2010). Younger children are more interested in playing on their own and/or interacting with significant adults, while older ones prefer to play with their peers. Pedagogies of early childhood education, deriving from these theories and recent researchers, utilize play in different forms in kindergartens and pre-school settings. The most valued form of play is however the “free” play, when child chooses what to play. Early childhood settings are also designed in a way that child can freely wonder around or join a group for a project led by an adult. (Anning 2010) Singing, dancing and reading are also other activities that could be classified as structured and adult-led play.

For some time, there has been some consensus in early years socio-cultural learning literature regarding how play may influence school readiness: A number of authors assert that play is a nurturing, creative space where children have the opportunity to be less directed and are free to be more in control of learning, as well as to make mistakes without serious consequences (Vygotsky 1978; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain 1998; Rogoff 2003; Bruner 2006; Edmiston 2008, Pramling-Samuelsson, & Fleer 2009; Moyles 2010; Brooker & Edwards 2010; Wood and Hedges 2013). When playing humans can suspend, manipulate and examine the usual rules of the social and physical worlds (Van Oers 2010). As a result of such opportunities to explore the world on their own terms, through play children will develop social skills self-confidence and learning dispositions that will enable them to engage not just with schooling, but lifelong learning. Socio-cultural perspectives starting from Vygotsky (1966, 1978) advance play as an activity format for learning where children linger in the zone from a sense of assimilating and accommodating knowledge (Brunner (2006). “Children experiment with the meanings and rules of serious life, but place these meanings and rules at the centre of attention” (Rogoff 2003p 298). Similarly Holland et al. (1998) argue that play is where we relax the normal roles, rules and tools allowing us to understand and manipulate “the collectively developed signs and symbols as the media by which children’s mental and emotional faculties were culturally formed.” P50. These perspectives also suggest that play is not something that is exclusive to children, it something that adults continue to do in conjunction with other activities to find out what is permissible within the figured worlds of society. Edmiston (2008) agrees with Vygotsky that imagination is play without action and suggests that “adults are good at imagining using only the mind, for example as they watch television and movies or read. Nearly all young children learn to imagine with minimal movement or noise.” (Edmiston 2008 10). Thus, play is a thinking tool that takes pleasure in processing new information and can help to generate innovative solutions to challenges by reducing the power of social barriers to learning.

The preceding paragraph summarised some of the social-developmental arguments for the positive impact for play in early childhood, there is also a children’s rights perspective that argues that children should have a right to play because this is vital part of their nature and because it so cross culturally visible as a pleasurable and significant part of childhood. Given the fact that play is child’s way of learning, why is it replaced with non-play activities? And how we can bring play back into child’s day to day life at home and at school, and not in pre-school only but also throughout the formal schooling? Especially during the first couple of years of primary, which is still considered within the period of early childhood (see UNICEF

1989 GC7), integrating play into curriculum of primary school, could be a strategic move to support an effective transition onwards from the early years.

This argument is present in the sociocultural perspective but is foregrounded to a much greater extent in the work of new materialist authors who foreground the value of play as space which levels interactions with both people, living and non-living things allowing them to play back Procter and Hackett (2017). This perspective asserts children's rights to engage affectively with the real world through play, (Lenz-Taguchi 2010; Olsen 2009; Holmes and Jones 2014). New Materialism also advocates play because it is a forum where children's own cultural backgrounds and interest can more easily become the focus of attention as compared to more directed or more structured pedagogies (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor 2015). Thus studying play has great potential for promoting the de-colonising and innovating the curriculum by contributing Noava's (2018) vision for comparative education;

- *To build a science of difference, rather than a 'solution' that tends to homogenise educational directions throughout the world;*
- *. To strengthen the public space, instead of contributing to the authority of experts, as if they alone possessed the type of knowledge that can be transformed into policy;*
- *. To revitalize the common, instead of yielding to the current fragmentation, a world of hyper-individualization in which we only interact with what is similar to us.*

(Noava 2018 552)

It is far more challenging to find a consensus in the early years play literature regarding how adults might structure, engage in and direct play in order to help children's development. The dilemmas and tensions in professional practice are foregrounded in by *Kjær, Bach & Dannesboe (in this issue)* Authors such as Bruner (2006) Wood (2010) advocate the provision of playful environments that allow children to develop their own play because adults tend to disrupt play. Thus a preschool environment that offers both adult and child led activities has been the thrust of international policies of early childhood provision in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (OECD). Authors such as Olsen 2009 and Edmiston 2008, Kuby (2016) suggest that adults can engage with children's play but they need to abide by the rules of play.

*When adults play with children they can likewise enter those worlds not to observe but to participate with children, not only to listen but to interact and shape meaning, and not only to enter imagined space-times but to explore possible ways of acting and identifying with other people. (Edmiston 2008 P12)*

In a study of groups of children engaging with a problem solving task, Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) identified that those who were set the task and had the solution modelled by adults solved the problem more quickly. However, those who were offered the same materials in a play context persisted longer in problem solving, generated more solutions and were less frustrated if they did not achieve the intended outcome and appeared to derive more pleasure from the activity. Thus providing opportunities to play develops problem solving skills and dispositions more effectively than predominantly adult-led activities.

Van Oers (2010) reflects on what adults should learn about engaging with children in play when they acknowledge it as an activity format first they should keep the situation meaningful to the children, it has to resonate with their interests, this might involve weaving

insights into how activity systems work as part of the existing narrative of the children's play. Second adults need to be aware of the rules of the activity and that these might vary. Third, the children need to have the freedom to maintain their game. These guidelines play a longer game beyond that of immediate mastery, by respecting children's rights and abilities it is argued that their confidence and willingness to learn with others is promoted.

New materialist writers emphasise careful observation of children's play and engagement with so that provocations to extended learning are sympathetic to the children's interests (Lenz- Taguchi 2009, Olsen 2009, Kuby 2016). There is considerable questioning in this perspective of whether children should be giving up this rich personalised learning experience in favour of more organised school-like learning the question is how the curriculum for older children might be adapted to include more activities that are playful. Kuby (2019) advocates detailed observation of children's play activities to notice and nurture how they engage with complex literacies within their play. Sanja Tatalović Vorkapić, and Vesna Katić (in this issue) also ask for much more attention to be given to showing how play supports early literacy and how practitioners are inducted into this knowledge.

In summary, if we take the view that play is an important format for both formal and informal learning as well as self-actualisation, then adults should seek to nurture opportunities for children's play as a powerful learning experience as part of the preparation for later learnings. Seeking to over-direct play may close out children's interests in learning with adults and in areas where they are deflected from identifying how they may find satisfaction in activity. Success cannot be judged simply on the basis of the ability to comply with task on entry to school it should take a longer view of reducing disaffection and alienation from learning. Effective lifelong learners will take pleasure in practicing learning and varying and playing within and beyond the existing boundaries that define their activity. Children can benefit greatly from play; space to play alone, space to play with peers, space to play with adults, space to play in directed tasks, these all help to prepare children for learning in school and beyond.

### **The papers in this issue**

The papers in this special issue each reflect on a different aspect of play and preparedness for school in their country context.

The first article presents an indication of the fierce political pressure to shift a long established pedagogy of play established in Denmark. Introducing the Danish context Tomas Ellegaard and Niels Kryger's article Changing the framing of play in times of increased emphasis on readiness, gives a clear indication of the sustained political pressure in Denmark to introduce more direct teaching into Kindergarten's and the back and forth movements in curriculum guidance as pedagogues and many parents resist these pressures.

Ida Somolanji Tokić and Tijana Borovac in their article, Children's symbolic play during the transition to school, introduce us to the preschool context in Croatia where a National Curriculum informs a compulsory period of preschool education prior to children starting school around the age of 6. The article supports the child-led, play based approach advocated in the Croatian National Curriculum and reviews the theoretical support in favour of the



efficacy of symbolic play in developing school readiness in the context of pressures to introduce more school-like pedagogy.

Returning to the Danish context the third paper examines how Kindergarten teachers in Denmark are dealing with the school readiness agenda in Practice. In their article *Academics as play and the social as discipline: School readiness in Denmark*, Bjørg Kjær, Dil Bach & Karen Ida Dannesboe discuss how pressure to improve national performance in international assessment comparisons has applied pressure for Danish kindergartens to focus more on literacy and numeracy activities. They present examples of the activities that children experience in Kindergartens to help them be ready for school socially including 'playing' at schools. The article illustrates that adults and children are very aware of specifically preparing for school and the tensions this may cause alongside their other more child-led activities.

The fourth paper *Transition as a shared responsibility*, Adrijana Visnjic Jevtic<sup>1</sup> & Ivana Viskovic<sup>2</sup>, focuses specifically on the period when children transition from preschool to school in Croatia. Drawing from surveys of parents, school and preschool teachers, together with interviews with preschool children, the authors suggest that there is considerable attention and sense of responsibility within the preschool to preparing children for moving to school. The article suggests that teachers and schools could develop greater sense of responsibility for this transition taking more time to get to know the children and creating an environment that allows children to demonstrate the competencies that they have rather than emphasising things they have yet to learn.

In the final paper *Literacy-related school readiness through play in Croatia*, Sanja Tatalović Vorkapić, and Vesna Katić, examine how trainee early educators are encouraged to engage with different types of kindergarten play and how this may promote a range of literacy skills. This is accompanied by a call for much more widespread research to illustrate the ways in which play can contribute to preschool as well as school experience.

We hope that this special issue illustrates that there is a great deal of consensus about the importance of play in child's learning adventure not only for school, but as a preparation for many aspects of life including self-confidence, creativity, and self-awareness. There is a shared concern and considerable evidence that eroding play opportunities and/ or considering play "only" for academic preparation for school in early childhood would be problematic. What comes through in this special issue is that the need to continue elaborating how play is a way of developing holistically over a life course of early childhood and preparing children not only for schooling but for further learning opportunities in life. We are very mindful of the Eurocentric focus of the papers in this issue and so, at time when the Covid-19 virus is highlighting the interconnected nature of our world and the importance of social communities, we would urge all those with interests in early childhood to continue initiatives to learn from each other. Academic forums need to be more open to sharing knowledge from different cultural contexts and recognise the institutionalised barriers that prevent this. The UNICEF (2019) report on preschool provision globally is focused on increasing access and quality to preschool experiences, as this happens there is still a great deal to learn about the many different ways that this can be realised in order to help reduce rather than increase inequalities.

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