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## The relation of play and learning empirically studied and conceptualised

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### ABSTRACT

Play is considered an important aspect of Early Childhood Education and Care. However, the relationship between play and learning is often taken for granted both in research and praxis. In this article, we study our own research group's empirical work over a 40-year period, and how we have used the concepts of play and learning. We observed that how the relation between play and learning has been conceptualised, have gone through changes during this period in a number of ways, in line with other research, influenced by policy, and theorised grounded in empirical studies towards what is called Developmental Pedagogy. Children's perspectives and teacher's sensitivity and responsiveness have been important features of the process of developing the preschool pedagogy in which play and learning are central. The relationship between play and learning are conceptualised differently, at the same time as the content (sometimes called curriculum in the English-speaking world) are equally important in the early as well as latest steps of this development in research.

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## Introduction

There seems to be a consensus within the research field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) that play is considered an important part of education. However, the meaning of exploring both play and learning in the same study, is seldom defined (Cheng and Johnson 2010). Even after 40 years of research into play and learning within ECEC, in our own research group at the University of Gothenburg, the definition of the relationship between play and learning has not been self-evident. Traditionally, learning has been viewed as an activity planned and organised by the teacher for distributing knowledge, while play has been considered to be the child's own initiative and a world of fantasy. Since now many research studies have shown the ambiguity of separating these two aspects, this article can be viewed as one way to enlighten this problem and take a step towards integrating them. Many scholars have tried to define 'play', but none succeeded (Lillemyr 2002). Thus, based on many years of research, we

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aim, in this article, to elaborate on how the relationship between play and learning is conceptualised and empirically studied within what has become consolidated as Developmental Pedagogy. By so doing, we intend to contribute to the discussion about research into play and learning in ECEC by making a touchdown in one research group's work, which was carried out over a prolonged period of time.

## Background

Globally, curricula for preschool, pre-primary school or any other name for pre-formal education, point out that play is an important concept to consider (Danniel and Pyle 2018). For instance, UNICEF (2018) published a brief based on the second target of Sustainable Development Goal 4 that by 2030 'all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education' (UN 2015). This was followed by the core message that a key element in ECEC is 'learning through play', or 'playful learning', in which children have agency and control over their experience. When children are allowed to choose their play, it is assumed that they develop intellectual, social, emotional and physical skills. Play can, however, be organised and executed in different ways on a continuum from child-initiated to teacher-designed activities.

Several attempts have been made to describe play in educational practice by researchers taking different perspectives on the role, function and value of play (e.g. Rogers 2011; Saracho and Spodek 1998). However, there seems to be a gap concerning how to draw conclusions and implications from research and theoretical development for educational practice (Cheng and Johnson 2010). This is alarming, since heightened expectations for academic outcomes in early years may induce narrow interpretations of so-called play-based pedagogy in ECEC and even the risk of 'highjacking' play in an attempt to justify education in the early years (Pyle and Danniel 2017; UNICEF 2018). 'Play-based' or 'play-oriented' followed by 'preschool', 'education', 'pedagogy', 'curriculum' and the like are frequently used terms; however, there seems to be little consensus in the academic community concerning their differences and similarities, and combinations of them. Danniel and Pyle (2018) present a general definition of the relationship between play and learning, 'to learn while at play', which fits most studies in the field but is not sufficient for conceptualising or giving directions on how to empirically study this educational phenomenon.

The large body of research that explores play in ECEC has origins in different perspectives and different theoretical cornerstones, based on what the particular study aims at developing understanding of. However, the research has, in common, some features that may help outline what constitutes the so-called play-based pedagogy in ECEC. First, the child is an agent in his/her learning. Second, the role of the teacher has been re-defined by many, deprecating from the traditional role of an instructor, based on the idea that the context of ECEC cannot include giving instructions and at the same time preparing for an exploring-friendly environment. Nevertheless, there is still debate about if, how and why teachers should involve themselves in play for educational purposes.

Based on a cultural-historical theory of education, Van Oers (2012a) developed an approach to learning labelled Developmental Education for children 3–8 years of age. The development was driven by modern psychological understandings of learning and

sought to do justice to the individuality of the children. This includes the normative and critical choices that teachers make in education where goal-oriented interaction with children is focal. Taking this approach, the teachers work in design research studies, trying to be critical of and creative in their practice with children, particularly in allowing children to actively exercise their agency. As such, play has become a key concept in education. Van Oers (2012a, 24) says: 'A play-based curriculum is not to be conceived as a curriculum that allows children to play now and then, but as a curriculum that basically takes playfully formatted cultural activities as contexts for learning'. By organising thematic work where children role play as part of the teaching process, children become engaged and interested in different knowledge areas. The teacher introduces cultural tools that contribute to children's play, and by so doing, the children's world expands. This approach acknowledges children's own experiences and the adults' responsibility in their work with young children. Furthermore, such an approach highlights a broad conception of goals for development, which goes beyond restricted cognitive achievements.

In the Developmental Education framework regarding children of any age, it is obvious that play is a key factor for educational practice where teachers are actively involved due to the goal-orientation of education. Based on a review of play-based education studies, Danniels and Pyle (2018) describe the role of the teacher as a continuum that incorporates varying levels of adult involvement in play. Thus, the actual meaning of teacher's involvement in play, with educational purposes, differs in this field of research. In the literature, concepts such as child-initiated and child-led activities related to play-based learning are common, and the role of adults is rather labelled as 'parallel players', team-mates, mentors or guides, that is, someone mostly supervising, i.e. an outsider to children's play (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid 2019). However, there seem to be some cultural differences found in the review study by Bubikova-Moan et al.; English-speaking countries often associate learning with school culture, whereas in Asia, which they describe as similar in many ways to the English-speaking countries, learning is more focused on school preparation. Northern Europe, on the other hand, mainly points towards social pedagogical tradition with a child-centred holistic view on learning aiming to develop socio-emotional competences. Even though the benefits of play-based learning, regardless of nationality, are said to contribute to children's development, teachers often see play as learning, where children develop particularly social competences. However, the role of the teacher in learning is rather diffuse. In Bubikova-Moan et al.'s review, some scepticism was found among teachers in general about the effectiveness of play in learning. Although teachers find it important to support children's play as part of the curricula, they have difficulties articulating how this support should be implemented. Or, as we see it, how the relation between play and learning may be conceptualised.

In an attempt to understand the theoretical underpinnings of play-based pedagogy, Hedges and Cooper (2018) observed a blend of play, learning and teaching in New Zealand ECEC settings. Central in their observations was a close relationship between teachers and children and experiences of common everyday situations, through which a mix of everyday and scientific concepts were explored. The Vygotskian concept Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) was found theoretically positioned in teachers' knowledge, expertise and engagement. 'We argue that two constructs – everyday and scientific concepts, and the zone of proximal development – position theoretically

ways in which teachers' knowledge, expertise and engagement might contribute to these "in moment" rich, thoughtful understandings of what we term relational play-based pedagogy' (Hedges and Cooper 2018, 1). In contrast to the unarticulated roles described by Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid (2019), the role of the teacher in this case is clearly described as mediating.

There are also voices arguing for the importance of teachers staying exempt from children's play, while regarding play as a means for children's learning. Lindqvist (2002), building on a Vygotskian perspective, emphasises that children develop reproduction skills (memory) and production skills (creativity and imagination) in play through dramatised stories (literature). The teacher is to offer a common 'play world' to help children develop their play in preschool. An aesthetic form of play becomes the meeting point between the inner and the outer world of the child. Children and teachers take joint places in dramatisations, but the role of the teacher is to dramatise a story from literature together with children, giving children a 'model' to follow as they continue playing out the rest of the story and in their future stories, then step back to avoid interfering with further progress of the play.

Closely related to the perspective of Lindqvist, Fleer (2011) has developed 'Conceptual Play-worlds', a systematic approach where children and teacher jointly play. The teacher is not only intentional in her teaching when choosing a story and designing a 'world' with imaginary spaces, but also in planning for a certain problem to be solved. In contrast to Lindqvist's teachers, the teacher in Fleer's Conceptual Play-world participates throughout the play activity, aiming to offer children experiences of concepts that otherwise would be difficult to explain to young children, often within Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields. The teacher thus takes the role of both mediator and playmate.

There are indeed many studies of ECEC in which play is central to educational practice. Play can be perceived as a continuum with high teacher participation in the choice of content and context offered to children (e.g. Fleer 2011) on one end, and low teacher participation and interference on the other end, which to some is of the utmost importance (e.g. Sundsdal and Øksnes 2015). Thus, policy and research emphasise play as central to children's learning, but differences appear in approaches to implementation in ECEC practices and how the play-learning relationship is theoretically framed.

## Outset for conceptualising play and learning

In this article, we aim to carry out a discussion based on research conducted by a research group at the University of Gothenburg regarding *how the relation between play and learning is conceptualised in empirical studies in preschool*. Research within the science of education and particularly in the area of ECEC at the University of Gothenburg has been conducted since the end of the 1960s (Pramling Samuelsson 2015). This research, which was, early on, informed by psychological theories, was designed as large-scale studies, which gave statistical results of child development and how environmental factors, such as educational arrangements, influence this development (Austin et al. 1976). However, at the beginning of the 1980s, the research switched focus to how children learn various content and how teachers could contribute to developing children's understanding of such content. The study, *The child's conception of learning* (Pramling

1983), was a turning point where 300 children between 3 and 8 years of age were interviewed about *their ways of experiencing* the concept 'learning'. The children's answers constituted qualitative different categories of conceptions, which then were related to age. In the same study, it also became clear that teachers were not always aware of the different ways in which children perceived and understood the content – they were unable to see the *children's perspectives*. In conclusion, from the 1980s onward, interest in learning to know the child's perspective as an outset for teaching and learning grew, emanating in a pedagogical approach called Developmental Pedagogy (Pramling and Mårdsgjö 1994; Pramling and Mårdsgjö 1994), why play became a natural feature of the research studies conducted.

The research studies taking the child's perspective as a key feature have for 40 years involved many researchers (most of whom have backgrounds as preschool teachers and an interest in contributing to practice via their research), including both doctoral students and senior researchers affiliated with the Department of Education at the University of Gothenburg and with other universities or learning centres. As such, there are more than 50 doctoral and licentiate theses that have been defended by students connected to this research group during this time period (see Pramling Samuelsson [2015] and the series *Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis*<sup>1</sup>, which publishes all doctoral theses at the Faculty of Education). More than 40 externally funded research projects have been conducted within the research group over the years. These studies, and the outcomes presented in publications of both a scientific and popular-scientific nature, constitute the origin for the discussion we here present as conceptualisation of the relation between play and learning in research.

### ***Child perspective and children's perspectives***

One important theoretical idea that has influenced Developmental Pedagogy is the concept of child perspective and children's perspectives, labelled by Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide (2010, 23) as two different perspectives: 'Child perspectives direct adults' attention towards an understanding of children's perceptions, experiences, and actions in the world', while 'Children's perspectives represent children's experiences, perceptions, and understanding their life world'. These two perspectives can also be linked to the UNCRC to do what is best for the child (from an adult perspective) or listen to children (the child's expressions). Both aspects are important in ECEC, but foregrounding one or the other has different implications for practice. What we in our research group have tried to take a stand towards is the child's perspective as the outset for both learning and play. Learning starts from the child's subjective world – their world and meaning – but will lead to a new subjective world, which could be a qualitative new way of understanding something or expanding their world to become more extensive (Pramling and Mårdsgjö 1994). The child's perspective has been a central concept during the whole research period. This is expressed in one of the very first popular scientific books published by the group based on research studies: *To understand the child's thinking* (Doverborg and Pramling Samuelsson [1985] 2012).

The following discussion is a theoretical elaboration influenced by a phenomenological approach where our interest is to identify and describe the phenomenon 'play and learning' as it appears in the research. This means that we focus on how the researchers

have conveyed their results from these studies and look for how play is described related to learning. The play-learning relationship particularly comes through in how the teacher's role is reflected when play and learning are featured in the studies. Patterns of conceptualisation cannot be seen as isolated instances, but appear in a longitudinal perspective where certain ways of expressing a concept emerge. The analytical approach for our discussion is thereby holistic and driven by what emerges as essential and what is foregrounded in the research studies.

## **Play and learning in developmental pedagogy research**

Even though theories, methods and content areas vary, a strong line in the research has been interested in learning and the methodological relationship to phenomenography – how the learner's perspective/understanding is both the starting point and the result of learning. The result of these kinds of studies shows the outcome space as qualitatively different ways people understand what is in focus for teaching – the content made sense of in different ways (Marton 1981). In later years, there were also a number of studies influenced by socio-cultural perspectives carried out (see Wallerstedt, Lagerlöf, and Pramling 2014), as well as variation theory (see Björklund 2016). Nevertheless, play and learning recur as central concepts in the research. Four themes emerge in how play and learning have been empirically studied, and thus how play and learning have been handled as concepts in research: (1) play as part of practice for learning, (2) the playing learning child as an individual, (3) play and learning integrated in education and (4) play-responsive teaching. In the following, these will be elaborated with examples from studies that illustrate key points or have had a substantial impact on the conceptualisation.

### ***Play as part of practice for learning***

The concept of play appears already in the earliest studies. Play has indeed always been an important aspect of Swedish preschool, as emphasised by Austin et al. (1975), but in the research conducted in the 1980s, we see an emphasis on teachers planning for play as part of the practice that primarily directs attention to the learning of specific content. The research thereby turns to descriptions of learning outcomes and how teachers should provide preconditions for young children's development.

One of these studies (Pramling 1990) aimed to investigate whether the use of meta-cognitive dialogues in educational practice with five to six-year-old children could contribute to developing children's understanding of certain learning content. A comparison with children whose teachers did not use meta-cognitive reflections but rather used the 'learning by doing' device, as if the child's own activities would lead to knowledge without communicative engagement of the teacher, was carried out to reveal differences in learning outcomes. The preschool worked with 'the shop', amongst other contents, as a thematic project over a prolonged period of time. The teacher and children built a 'supermarket' in preschool with packages that the children brought with them from home. During the play sessions, the cashier role was introduced, deliveries came with a truck, etc. In this way, play was part of the pedagogy but also primarily an activity for the children themselves. The teacher planned play activities relating to the content she wanted

children to focus on and develop perspectives about – in this case to explore the concept and meaning of advertisement. Afterwards, she conducts a discussion with the children, asking them to relate their experiences visiting shops and their ideas of how shops work, etc. The children's awareness was directed towards advertisements by cutting out ads from magazines and attending to various packages in the shop. This research study directed interest towards how children made sense of the concept of advertisement, that is, the content they were to learn about (Pramling 1991). Results from the research constitute children's conceptions of the content in question and were laid out as descriptions of the qualitatively different ways in which the children understood the activities they had been participating in.

Teachers using play to influence children's learning as a framework or as inspiration is characteristic of the way this research depicts play in the context of learning in preschool. The teacher could indeed be a participant in children's play and the play frames as described in the research, but the main focus is on learning outcomes. Nevertheless, a critical aim underlying the research was discovering the children's perspectives – how the subjective world of the children appeared to them – and how that could be developed in meta-cognitive dialogues between the teacher and the children. Play was the underlying concept used as activities to influence learning towards an intended goal.

### ***The playing learning child***

In several studies, we observe that children stand out as individuals that do not separate play and learning. This is particularly evident in studies of the youngest learners (e.g. Lindahl 1996; Öhberg 2004). In observations of toddlers' play in preschool, Lindahl (1996) analysed learning within the frames of playing 'shop' with nature items outdoors, where the idea of 'buying' was explored by the child herself through role-playing. There are other examples in Öhberg's study (2004) describing toddlers' self-initiated activities with toys and interaction with peers. In these examples, children's learning is strongly connected to what they were acting upon while playing, such as figuring out how to fit dolls into a trolley. The children in Lindahl's and Öhberg's studies do not separate activities into playing or learning. They are simply focusing on something in their surrounding world and trying to make sense of it. From a pedagogical view, we can interpret the content for learning that they are trying to make sense of (such as shop-keeping or measurement), but what stands out in these studies is that the child is playing and learning by extending his or her experiences while playing, pretending and imitating what to them are interesting phenomena. Such observations (see also Pramling and Pramling Samuelsson 2010; Pramling Samuelsson et al. 2008) result in a view of children as *playing, learning* individuals – individuals that do not play at one time and learn at another. From this one can say that the research drew attention to the playing, learning child as an individual, that is, play and learning were attributed to the child – as a personal trait.

Around the Millennium shift, Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson ([2003] 2014, 2008) conducted a meta-analysis of the research that had been carried out in the same research group up until then. The aim was to consolidate the results from all studies into a pedagogy, based on conceptions emerging from the meta-analyses of what was leading to children's understandings and change of conceptions: (1)

communication on two levels: as children's spontaneous communication and a meta-cognitive reflective dialogue when the teacher is involved; (2) similarities between play and learning; children communicate in play and use meta-communication spontaneously; the same process is to be used in learning, shifting from communication to meta-communication with support of the teacher and (3) variation is a source for play and for learning, that is variation in children's ways of making sense of concept that teaching is used as a source for giving children experiences of something. These ideas conceptualised the preschool approach called *Developmental Pedagogy* (Pramling and Pramling Samuelsson 2011) which directs attention to similar underlying features in children's play and learning that motivate the consolidation of play and learning in ECEC. This also means that the children's perspectives and experiences are both the beginning and result of learning.

### **Play and learning integrated in education**

Sweden has had a national curriculum for preschool since 1998. National guidelines like the curriculum, outline goals to strive for, and consequently, the question of whether it is possible to integrate play and learning in a goal-directed preschool is posed. This was also reflected in the research at the University of Gothenburg, emanating from the above-described insights of children's perspectives and the individual playing, learning child as central features for ECEC development. For instance, in a project by Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson (2006), nine preschool groups were followed for two years by monthly video recordings for analysis of teachers' and children's various positions concerning power and dialogue. They found instances where playing and learning were integrated by teachers sharing focus with children, communicating and allowing both fantasy and reality to come into play in a shared situation. During interactions characterised by instruction and 'formal teaching', this kind of integration which allows fantasy to take place in a learning situation was absent. Integration of play and learning was found to be related to the enacted communication between the teacher and the children as a joint process where fantasy and reality came hand in hand. The teacher and children contributed fantasy to the situation. This also meant that the teacher sometimes positioned herself on the same level as children and challenged children to explore new ideas and perspectives – real and imagined – opening up a space for both play and learning in the same situation. That children themselves can make room for their playfulness indicates that the teachers to some extent give children the space to do so, or open up for children's agency – a dialogic process developing in interactions between individuals and the environment (Vygotsky 1978). However, this demands that teachers develop a goal-oriented strategy, which involves play as well as learning (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2009). The answer to the question about possibilities for goal orientation in preschool practices was found to be dependent on how teachers view learning and their own role in it, how power is distributed between children and teachers, how teachers are able to open doors for children's fantasies and how the child's world communicates and interacts with the teacher's (Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson 2006).

When considering the study described above and similar ones conducted within the research group (e.g. Gustafsson and Mellgren 2005; Dahlgren and Olsson 1985), one can say that play has taken a step forward in the pedagogy and play and learning are

integrated as a whole. Not only are children considered playing, learning individuals, the teachers allow children agency to bring in their perspectives and play into communication and interaction with the teacher, also when the teacher has planned to teach a certain content. This has contributed to the development of Developmental Pedagogy with play and learning integrated in education as one of the key characteristics.

This developed way of relating play and learning has led to new ways of seeing pre-school teachers' educational work with children, as to see the whole day as the curriculum. This means that the teacher is to be active and interact with the children about the content areas she wants the children to become aware of. This stood in stark contrast with traditional ways of planning and acting in preschool, where most often the teacher would work with the children on various themes or content, and then let them play freely as two separate activities. This contrast, emerging in Developmental Pedagogy, emphasised an expectation of the teacher to organise children in smaller groups and involve herself in different activities together with the children – creating the possibility to partake in both playing and learning in any situation that may occur during the whole day and not only in pre-planned themes and workshops.

### **Play-responsive teaching**

In studies such as Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson (2006), it was seen that children did involve teachers in their play and learning for different reasons: to get help, to be acknowledged, to make the teachers aware of other children breaking rules, to get information about and confirmation of how things work but also just to include teachers in their play. Both children and teachers seemed to agree on these forms of interplay, where some forms of play could be interpreted as signs of a traditional teacher role, i.e. that teachers know how things should be and possess power and knowledge. However, the teacher's role as a participant in children's playtime was not explored in the earlier studies, but became central as the debate about the concept of 'teaching' was introduced in a revision of the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800). This change in policy highlighted not only what children should learn but rather how learning is to be orchestrated in the goal-oriented but still play-focused practice of ECEC. We can also see the traces of phenomenography in many of the studies focused on teaching in preschool, since the theoretical framework takes the learner's perspective as the focal point with pedagogical implications – what is the learner offered to experience in a certain situation and how are changes in ways of experiencing the world made possible in a meaningful way? Teaching in accordance with Developmental Pedagogy relies on the communicative practice of ECEC, and in this respect, *about what* and how communication takes place both become central. Play is thereby also present in the studies conducted most recently in the research group, but is given even more attention as a prerequisite for learning in preschool.

One example is a study by Magnusson and Pramling (2018) where an adult and a child were followed in dialogue about a drawing the child was constructing about numbers, which he called 'the Numberland'. The dialogue is truly a joint activity between the adult and the child, where the establishment of intersubjectivity becomes critical. Both teacher and child switch back and forth between as it is (reality) and as if it is (fantasy). The adult helps the child distinguish between aspects of numbers and supports

the process of exploration by asking challenging questions that the child does not seem to have thought about before. For example, 'How many countries (numbers) are there', providing the child with new thinking tools to think and play with. The teacher is responsive to and plays together with the child; they share a play world and switch between talking within the activity (animating: 'I') and talking about it (meta-communicating). These concepts and this focus on a teacher's involvement in play and learning were later theorised based on a large praxis-oriented research study as play-responsive teaching (see further Pramling et al. 2019).

The notion of play-responsive teaching was derived from the project where teachers actively tried to take part in children's ongoing play to observe what happens and see how they could contribute to the progression of children's play by supporting the development of a narrative within which children could play. Joint analyses (teachers and researchers) revealed the necessity of intersubjectivity and the impact of narrative and meta-communication to support the progression of play and to introduce alterations that challenge the boundaries and experiences in the ongoing play. In this project, the teachers became quite skilled in becoming involved in children's play as play partners. But the teachers soon realised that they had to plan for the play to be able to participate. This raised the issue of play in ECEC to the educational level of discussion: since play cannot be taken for granted, it has to be conditioned on equal terms as any other activity in preschool. When such conditions were fulfilled, it became clear that the teachers, by being part of children's play, could introduce or support exploration of content areas related to the curriculum – that is, to introduce academic content and skills into a frame of play. For instance, this was explored in a study by Magnusson and Pramling Samuelsson (2019) in which a shop was organised by a teacher and some children who worked together in deciding on items to be included in the shop and how one is 'doing shopping'. The children expanded their play by their own initiatives but also by the teacher who was giving suggestions like 'Do we need to make shopping lists to know what to buy?' This opened up for literacy experiences and exploration. The teacher is part of the play, introducing various aspects of written language, which becomes a necessity for the children's play to continue and contributes new cultural tools that are made meaningful in the children's context of play. Children – supported by teachers – thus become agents in their own learning.

In a recent project informed by Developmental Pedagogy but also implementing variation theory principles for teaching a demarcated learning object (the meaning of numbers to answer 'how many'), it was explicitly shown how responsiveness to children's directed attention and initiatives in a situation is key for learning (Björklund and Palmér 2022). During reading activities in preschool, teachers aimed to extend children's knowledge on the meaning of numbers where a book only worked as a starting point for discussion and numerical exploration with props. In a detailed analysis of teacher-child interactions, it was revealed that when children's initiatives were taken as the starting point and the teacher added some value or alternative meaning to what meaning the child expressed, it upheld the necessary intersubjectivity between the teacher's and child's perspectives and also offered learning potential. When the perspectives were not coordinated, such as the child attending to sorting blocks in colour while the teacher was talking about numbers of blocks, dialogue often fell apart. Teaching can be concluded as successful, in terms of extended ways of experiencing a phenomenon,

based on empirical findings from both the study of Björklund and Palmér (2022) and studies in Pramling et al. (2019), when it depends on a balancing act between shared perspectives and alterations that stretches the boundaries for what is known and accepted within the context of that ongoing play. Thus, the teacher needs to focus both on the child's perspective and current knowledge as well as how certain content can be made meaningful for the child's play to progress.

## Conclusion

The concept of play in children's learning is highlighted in UNICEF's goal for sustainable development concerning children's right to education and the brief (2018) for how to fulfil this goal. We adhere to this emphasis, but also agree with Pyle and Danniels (2017) concern for an overly narrow interpretation of ECEC's definition of play. In our research group, we have conducted studies over long periods of time where play is a relevant feature of learning; but even so, it has been shown in this overview and discussion that conceptualising the relation between play and learning is a complex endeavour and is often influenced by policy on education, e.g. it is reflected in the curriculum and Education Act and is evident in the fact that preschools are viewed as a social institution. For instance, the early research described here is important to see in the light of the specific time period and policies that frame said research. When preschools in Sweden began to expand in number in the 1970s, the concept of development was commonly used when discussing aims for children attending preschool. In 1987, general advice was given by the National Board of Health and Welfare for pedagogical programmes in preschool, introducing the notion of learning, partly inspired by *The Child's Conception of Learning* (Pramling 1983). The debate about the concept of learning was heated for some years, since the preschool teachers did not recognise the concept – they found it connected with school education, which was not what they thought preschool was all about. Today, 'learning' is accepted in preschool, but it is important to have the historically informed discourse in mind when discussing the first research studies about children's learning. The longitudinal overview we present in this article may also highlight this contextual feature as necessary to consider in future research, that is, to broaden the view on how policy and also teacher education affect the practices and in what directions the practices are possible to develop.

The research group's main interest and method of empirically studying learning have partly changed over time but has always included play. This article has elaborated on this development and shows how the research has developed from considering play as an 'activity arranged by the teachers for children to process their learning' to taking play as the outset for teaching content to be meaningful for children, building on the idea that 'play and learning have to be integrated in pedagogy'. If children are playing, learning individuals, pedagogy needs to learn from this and adapt the educational practices to this fact.

Later studies have thus turned towards exploring the play-learning relationship as a feature of teaching in preschool, suggesting that it is critical that teachers take part in children's play without destroying or interrupting the play. The communication processes then comes into the foreground, a process in which children and teachers are involved in all kinds of activities – introduced by the teacher as well as the child –

moving between reality (as is) and fantasy (as if) while upholding sufficient intersubjectivity and thereby sharing experiences and meaning that facilitate the learning of meaningful content. From the longitudinal perspective, we can thereby see that the relation between play and learning has changed from a more or less taken-for-granted process, influenced by developmental psychological ideas of children processing their experiences through play, to an interest in better understanding and theorising how learning and play work as intertwined features of a teaching practice suitable for preschool (e.g. Pramling et al. 2019). Consequently, this influences what researchers focus on in studies and what is considered valuable to base ECEC on.

In the international field of research, we can see a continuum in the description of teachers' roles and involvement in children's play and learning, from facilitators to mediators and co-players (see Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid 2019; Danniels and Pyle 2018; Hedges and Cooper 2018). The role of the teacher in today's research carried out by the group at the University of Gothenburg is close to how Fleer (2011) and Van Oers (2012a, 2012b) describe the teacher, that is, goal-oriented and highly sensitive to children's lived experiences. Play becomes a natural feature of learning both as an outset (children's interests and initiatives) and a result (extended experiences that enrich their playing). The communication and playfulness is comparative with Fleer and Van Oers approaches, although Fleer's approach is mainly planned activities often related to STEM, and Van Oers' approach is using play activities for learning. Our contribution is that we see the development towards play-responsive teaching as something that can take place everywhere, in spontaneous or planned routine situations (at the dinner table, in the woods, etc.), as well as in play. Furthermore, we argue based on the 40 years of studies that it is not enough to engage children in talking about their surrounding world, taking the Developmental Pedagogy approach also means to use meta-communication to get children to become aware of what is focused on in the communication. Looking at the development during the years, we may conceptualise the research as holding children's perspectives as key. However, early on, the content on which children were to express their perspectives was introduced by the teacher. In later research, the teacher picks up on the child's directed attention and contributes experiences that expand the child's perspective. This expansion is also offered by the teacher in the recent approach but has a feature of responsiveness to the child's intentions as a starting point for teaching. In this way, the communication processes are fusing the concepts of play or learning together in Developmental Pedagogy, proposing a sustainable pedagogy that does not separate play from learning but builds upon their similarities in character.

In our strive to develop a pedagogical approach in ECEC based on empirical studies, content has always been of importance, which also seemed to come out positively in play-responsive teaching where it was shown that teachers could relate in a play-responsive manner to content from the curriculum (Pramling et al. 2019). The theoretical ideas underlying play-responsive teaching brings for important insights of how (teachers are) to interact with children to enable play *and* learning through a balancing act of establishing intersubjectivity and offering alterations. Developmental Pedagogy and the studies conducted within that strand of research (e.g. Björklund and Pramling Samuelsson 2020) add to the field of knowledge principles for how to communicate with children to enable them to develop their ways of experiencing phenomena in their surrounding world and for them meaningful concepts, contents and skills. Taken altogether, we see

the latest developments in this research as two sides of the same coin – a pedagogy for the twenty-first century ECEC that adheres to the child's perspective and offers the child the best opportunities to broaden and develop experiences and skills through play and learning. We suggest that implementing the play-responsive approach while being oriented towards different content areas or different learning objects in teaching is a significant issue that requires further empirical studies and theorising.

Consequences for policy is that curricula have to be revised and considered about play and learning is a new way, based on latest scientific results, since preschool should be grounded on research and scientific knowledge. From the discussion above, implications for teachers are primarily to take part in children's play, following and contributing to the development of the play and of the content knowledge in focus – not the least through meta-communication of what is going on.

## Note

1. <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/4560>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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