

Playing, Learning and Meaning Making: Early Childhood Curriculum Unfolding

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Abstract

Play, Participation, and Possibilities: An Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Alberta is a sociocultural curriculum framework intended to provoke dialogue on and thinking about young children's playing and learning. Viewing

curriculum as situated, contested and always-already happening in early childhood programs, the authors draw on a mini-narrative of children's play and educator practices to make visible what it means to co-construct curriculum in the here and now with young children. They describe curriculum-meaning-making processes that support deep and further complexified thinking, including pedagogical dialogue, critical revisiting of pedagogical documentation and curriculum cross-checking. Through honouring young children as mighty learners and citizens, and co-imagining possibilities, multiple new potentialities for children's play and learning are revealed.

Why do young children need a curriculum? Why can't children just play? These are two of the many questions we considered in our journey to research and write *Play, Participation, and Possibilities: An Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Alberta* (Makovichuk et al 2014).¹ They are troubling questions, reminding us of the persistent tendency to separate play and learning, as well as the challenges that arise when we envision early childhood curriculum as embedded in, and arising out of, children's everyday play experiences.

In this article, we draw on a mini-narrative of daily early childhood play and practices to begin to theorize alongside an educator using the *Play, Participation, and Possibilities* framework to make meaning and co-construct curriculum with children and families. The role of the educator is highly responsive—actively participating through reflective thoughtfulness and graceful interpretation, making meaning of how children may be experiencing the curriculum. In this way, we understand early childhood curriculum as always situated within local communities and reflective of family, social and cultural practices.

The *Play, Participation, and Possibilities Curriculum Framework*

Play, Participation, and Possibilities is a sociocultural curriculum framework intended to provoke dialogue on and thinking about young children's playing and learning. It was written for diploma- and degree-qualified early childhood educators working with young children (birth to five) in child care and family day homes in Alberta, and it has recently been piloted in prekindergarten settings.²

Why do young children need a curriculum? Why can't children just play? We propose that curriculum is not an alternative to children's play; rather, play is a powerful context through which early childhood curriculum unfolds. Play holds a central position in the Alberta curriculum framework. *Play and playfulness* is one of the four holistic play-based goals outlined in *Play, Participation, and Possibilities* (section 3.1) to promote children's intellectual and social construction of knowledge.³ The curriculum framework also positions play as a disposition to learn (Claxton and Carr 2004)—a disposition that is strengthened when educators notice, name and nurture everyday play experiences, actively and intentionally promoting children's capacity for inventing, creating, imagining, theorizing, narrating stories, exploring, representing, and taking risks in and for learning (Makovichuk et al 2014, 119).

The production and implementation of provincial early learning and child care curriculum frameworks across Canada (Langford 2012) and around the world (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2006) have been profoundly influenced by reconceptualist theory, creating space for theorizing that shifts professional practice and pedagogy from developmental to sociocultural and postfoundational perspectives (Cannella 2008; Iannacci and Whitty 2009; Kessler and Swadener 1992; Pacini-Ketchabaw and Prochner 2013; Pinar and Reynolds 1992).

Reconceptualist views of curriculum embrace teaching, learning and curriculum relationships as complex and contested notions (Pacini-Ketchabaw 2010; Iannacci and Whitty 2009; MacNaughton 2003). These relationships are deeply entangled with images of what it means to be a learner and a teacher, and always situated within value-laden historical, societal and cultural contexts (MacNaughton 2003; Sellers 2013). The relational nature of early childhood curriculum is further understood as a complex conversation (Pinar et al 2000; Grumet 1995). Adopting Grumet's (1999,

24) assertion that "we live curriculum before we describe it," we enact curriculum not as a checklist of outcomes but, rather, as an active process in which meaning is co-constructed through multiple and diverse dialogues about what has taken or is taking place. In this, we knowingly participate in a discourse of meaning making, described by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007) as confronting and struggling within multiple situated contexts (social, historical, economic, political and cultural) in which early childhood curriculum is influenced, shaped and experienced. Within a discourse of meaning making, these and other influences are revealed, "producing meaning [and] deepening understanding" (p 110) as people share perspectives, ponder, question, debate, discuss and enact curriculum decisions.

In this article, we explore a mini-narrative of an educator and children thinking about small cars, from the perspective that curriculum is always-already happening within the daily experiences of young children and their families in early learning and care programs, and that enacting early learning curriculum is messy, iterative, deeply theoretical and highly intuitive (Aoki 1992; Pinar and Reynolds 1992; Grumet 1995; Sellers 2013).

With this view of curriculum, we understand children's "play as one of their ways of creating a dialogue with each other, with adults, and with objects" (Elliot 2010, 11). In play, children are curriculum-makers (Dewey 1943; Brown 1999). We draw additional inspiration from Grumet and Stone's (2000, 191) assertion that "curriculum is everyday life" and Sellers's (2013, 65) notion of children "curriculum-ing" (performing curriculum within lived experiences). It is within the active and social nature of children's curriculum-ing that "they open possibilities for enhancing adult views of curriculum" (p 49). Children's curriculum-ing is shaped and reshaped in the relationships between and among children and with responsive, reflective educators who understand the importance of keeping the curriculum dialogue open, the questions alive and the possibilities endless (Elliot 2010; Sellers 2013; Olsson 2009).

Play, Participation, and Possibilities envisions early childhood curriculum as a way of being together within a "practice of relationships" (Stonehouse and Duffie 2001) with children and families and within time, spaces and materials. The term *practice of relationships* describes the complex and dynamic relationships that are always evolving within early childhood experiences, which are deeply meaningful because of who we are together. Contemporary notions of learning (Yelland et al 2008) suggest that as children learn about the

world in relationship with others, they are constructing an image of who they are—“their own capacities and identities as learners” (p 83).

With this understanding of children, described in *Play, Participation, and Possibilities* as “mighty learners and citizens” (Makovichuk et al 2014, xi) who are building knowledge and learner identities in relationship with others, we think about educators coming alongside children and families to deepen their understanding: Who is this child as a learner? What does he or she already know? (Dewey 1943; MacNaughton 2003).

When we think about teaching–learning relationships in these ways, the boundaries between the teacher and the learner become fluid and flexible: the educator and the child (and, potentially, the family) become co-learners and co-researchers, and the curriculum—a living curriculum—is understood as emerging from within these relationships.

Putting *Play, Participation, and Possibilities* to Work

A sociocultural curriculum framework such as *Play, Participation, and Possibilities* offers educators a lens for looking at and thinking about children’s play and learning. Educators reflect on children’s experiences in relation to the framework’s five core concepts, four holistic play-based goals and five dispositions to learn (see Figure 1).

As a tool for reflection and interpretation, the curriculum framework helps early childhood professionals pursue questions such as the following:

- How are children experiencing the physical and relational early childhood environment?
- What materials and spaces are captivating and igniting the children’s imagination and theory making?
- What are the ideas and questions the children are pursuing?

In pursuit of understanding children’s experiences, ideas, questions and theories, educators begin to shift away from habitual practices (“We do it this way because we have always done it this way”) and toward increasingly intentional and meaningful curriculum decisions that reflect the children; their families; and their unique local, social and cultural experiences (Curtis et al 2013; Yelland et al 2008). Engaging in curriculum-meaning-making processes, educators consider diverse perspectives and ways of being as they intermingle within everyday experiences and co-imagine possibilities for expanding and extending children’s play and learning.

Early childhood curriculum meaning making is grounded in sociocultural theory and postmodern perspectives that suggest that there are many ways to know and experience living and learning (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 2007; Sellers 2013; Olsson 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw 2010). Meaning making invites (inter)personal agency—for children, families and educators—as questions are posed and pursued, ideas are offered and developed, and assumptions are revealed and debated in relationship with others. Curriculum meaning making is about socially constructing the meaning(s) of specific events and is contextualized within local communities.

Core Concepts

- The image of the child: a mighty learner and citizen
- A practice of relationships: your role as an early learning and child care educator
- Mighty learners: nurturing children’s dispositions to learn
- Responsive environments: time, space, materials and participation
- Transitions and continuities: supporting children and families through change

Holistic Play-Based Goals

- Well-being
- Play and playfulness
- Communication and literacies
- Diversity and social responsibility

Children’s Dispositions to Learn

- Playing
- Seeking
- Participating
- Persisting
- Caring

FIGURE 1. *Play, Participation, and Possibilities*—core concepts, holistic play-based goals and children’s dispositions to learn.

Applying this notion of meaning making, and building on the international work of other early childhood researchers, Perry, Henderson and Meier's (2012) model of co-inquiry, with three interrelated aspects (observation and documentation, reflection and interpretation, and planning and taking action), offers educators a frame for reflecting and interpreting what may be taking place in children's play.

Three assumptions form the foundation for this type of curriculum inquiry:

- Everything children do has meaning for them.
- How educators make meaning of what children are doing influences how the curriculum is co-constructed.
- How educators respond matters for how children see themselves as mighty learners and citizens.

The following mini-narrative, which illustrates how an educator thinks about children's play and her daily decisions as curriculum, exemplifies these seminal ideas. Following the first of many pedagogical conversations between Brittany (the educator) and Lee (the researcher), the story continued unfolding in unexpected ways as the children's play revealed their insights, their questions and how Brittany made meaning for herself.

One Day in a Preschool Playroom

Lee observed and photographed Brittany as she gathered a small group of children and asked, "What can we do with a car?" The children quickly answered, "We can roll a car" and then "We need a road."

These comments ignited the children into action, and they started removing small blocks from the shelves to commence construction. They laid the blocks end to end, forming a roadway on the carpeted floor. Within minutes, several children were rolling small toy cars across the surface of the block roadways.

Brittany participated as a co-player, rolling a car with the children. A young girl, Mackenzie,⁴ located a clipboard and a pencil and appeared to be taking notes, making marks as she watched the other children play. Brittany looked up at her and then continued to roll the car. Soon Mackenzie settled into a space beside Brittany and joined the car drivers. In the span of 20 minutes, Brittany had shifted from actively participating as a co-player to sitting alongside the children in play. She continued to participate by noticing and commenting on the children's play. Other children soon joined in, and the play continued.

Revisiting documentation of children's play helps educators and other early childhood professionals put the co-inquiry model into motion. Through reflection and interpretation, educators make meaning of what children are doing in play. Stacey (2009) calls this important reflection the "missing middle," describing how it is often overlooked in the busyness of daily classroom life, yet it is essential to meaning making and co-constructing curriculum with children.

On the day Lee visited, she and Brittany revisited the documentation Lee had collected of her and the children. Though Lee framed several questions for their dialogue, Brittany also shared her thinking, which took them in an unanticipated direction.

Brittany connected the children's play that day to an event several months earlier—the removal of the small toy cars from the classroom. The classroom team had decided to put the cars away after observing conflict between the children because some of them were carrying handfuls of cars around and not sharing. Brittany described a difficult conversation among the team—a debate about whether or not to remove play objects to redirect children's behaviour. She recalled the words of a colleague: "If we remove the cars, it will be like saying that the children can have an interest in cars—but not here in our classroom." This comment troubled Brittany. Although she was concerned about the time the educators were spending on supporting children's negotiations over the cars, seemingly without progress, she also placed great importance on children's ideas and interests as a launching point for evolving classroom projects. Her internal conflict prompted her to look for an opportunity to reintroduce the cars as play materials—on the day that Lee happened to be observing and happened to have this conversation with her.

The pedagogical conversation also revealed Brittany's overarching goals for the car play she was re-embarking upon with the children. She clarified, "My goal is to help the children develop and share ideas about how cars can be used differently. I know that the children have ideas." Brittany described how she wanted to create a space where each child knew that his or her ideas were valued. She considered potential building materials that might provoke the children to use the cars in different ways than they had previously. She said, "I wanted each group to have an experience [using the cars] that they could draw upon once the cars are [again] freely accessible." She decided to continue playing in the carpeted block area with small groups of children, as she considered additional building materials to support the children's ideas—ideas that already were shaping their co-constructed curriculum.

The following story, titled *Children and the Cars*, unfolded as the ideas between and among the children and Brittany were revealed and shaped within everyday lived experiences (Grumet and Stone 2000) and through the affordances of time, space and materials. Our goal for sharing this storied event is to make evident Brittany's curriculum decisions in relation to her understanding of the children's "curriculum-ing" (Sellers 2013, 65) in play—their performance of their curriculum, with Brittany participating and interpreting. Within the story, Brittany reflected using the *Play, Participation, and Possibilities* framework's goals, dispositions and core concepts, which deepened her understanding of this co-constructed curriculum.

Children and the Cars

The next day, Brittany gathered a second group of children in the carpeted block area. This time, she held a basket of masking tape and small scissors as she once again asked the children, "What can we do with a car?" The children responded, "We need to have places for cars to go."

They took up her invitation to use the masking tape. As she offered this new representational material (the tape) to the children, Brittany explained that she imagined them taping lines and curves to represent roadways. She offered this new medium in the familiar context of the block area, knowing that this group of children were enthusiastic block builders. The children's decision to use the tape revealed their disposition as risk takers in the spirit of play and learning as they eagerly took up this new challenge (using the tape) in combination with a familiar play medium (the blocks). Focused on the places the cars might travel between, the children began to tape the outlines of familiar buildings (a car wash, the university, a coffee shop, a furniture store). As they constructed these places, Taylor took up the role of car driver, moving a small car over the taped roadways from place to place.

Reflecting on this continued "curriculum-ing" (Sellers 2013, 65), Brittany recognized her role as a co-player. Welcomed into the children's play, she cut tape alongside Neela and Tessa, who negotiated the swirling, twisted lengths of tape with tremendous persistence. The importance and the complexity of Brittany's in-the-moment decision were revealed in retrospect: she recognized that in her efforts to supply tape to support the children's flow of ideas about places the cars might travel, she was also supporting the children who were driving the cars. Equally important, she supported the tape cutters by giving them time to negotiate the challenging new

medium. She considered the many cooperative roles (drivers, tape cutters, tape layers) that the children's play opened up as Taylor drove along the roadways built by the children who created places and connecting roads with the tape supplied by the tape cutters.

During Brittany and Lee's next pedagogical dialogue, they pondered another moment between Brittany and one child, Tian. Brittany described a short pause in the play, when she observed Tian and wondered aloud, "Now the car wash is done." Her expression in the retelling captured Lee's attention: the simple observation appeared to be more of an invitation without asking the direct question, "What's next?" In response, Tian offered, "Sometimes, after the car wash, we go to IKEA." His response to her observation prompted ideas from other children in the group and led to the construction of many more familiar places that revealed the children's unique family experiences. Brittany acknowledged that "for some children, direct questions stop their ideas."

Meaning making made possible through revisiting moments of the children's "curriculum-ing" (Sellers 2013, 65) and through having curriculum conversations with others deepened Brittany's understanding of the everyday lived curriculum, as well as her intuitive knowledge of these children. This meaning-making process resonates with Grumet's (1999) notion of an enacted and living curriculum, revealing the generative nature of this sensitive work and making way for further possibilities.

The tape was left on the carpet—traces of the children's collaboration in the form of a map of their personal landmarks. When the third group entered the play space, with the previous group's ideas visible, Brittany asked the same question: "What can you do with a car?" The children decided that their homes must be included. Maggie constructed two houses, both with large windows. Nikos constructed a house for himself and his brother, Taylor. As Nikos travelled along the taped roadways, he commented, "I have to go through IKEA to get to David's house." David created several houses, and during cleanup one day, he placed his family photo in one of the houses. Brittany and Lee wondered, *Is this his home on the map?* Zachary, who lives in a rural community, decided that his house would go "right beside the grocery store." With each addition, Brittany and Lee pondered the ideas the children were representing—their lived experiences (sharing a house with a brother and placing a family portrait in a home) and their imagined experiences. In play, a child was afforded the power to move his home closer to the grocery store. Brittany and Lee's shared observations led them to recognize how the children

moved seamlessly between their lived and their imagined worlds.

Next, the children moved this play beyond the structure of small groups and into their free play. They requested paper and tape and began to add details such as trees, a river and a castle (see Figure 2).



FIGURE 2. Map of children's personal landmarks.

Throughout and following this storied event, Brittany shared many aha moments, such as the following:

I paid more attention to my role with the children through this small group process and into other daily experiences. I had always played with the children. Within our reflection, I began to recognize my role in children's play, and the intentional decisions I was making became clear.

In addition to reflecting on pedagogical documentation, Brittany and Lee used an interpretative process known as curriculum cross-checking (Strickland 1994/95). Curriculum cross-checking is an approach used to interpret what educators have observed in children's play, using the framework's holistic goals and dispositions to learn as a lens. In this way, children's play is the curriculum, and educators use the framework goals

to describe the value of children's play and to plan further play experiences that will extend, connect and deepen children's exploration.

Brittany recalls that when she looked through the curriculum framework,

I was impressed with myself. Looking at what the children and I achieved through the lens of the curriculum framework, I was proud of us. I knew the children's play was important—the curriculum goals gave our experience so much value. Every child was achieving at [his or her] own level. When I looked at how the communication and literacies learning goals describe how children “[use] language to make friends, share materials, structure, negotiate, and create imaginary worlds” [Makovichuk et al 2014, 105]—that spoke to me about each child through this process.

Play, Participation, and Possibilities for Supporting Curriculum Meaning Making

Within collaborative and critical dialogues, the *Play, Participation, and Possibilities* curriculum framework allows early childhood professionals to explore storied moments of children's playing in relation to everyday curriculum decisions. The five core concepts (see Figure 1) provoke educators to think about, question, debate and critically explore what it means to enact a practice of relationships with an image of the child as a mighty learner and citizen. Within this reciprocal relationship between the educator and the children, curriculum shifts from a list of outcomes to be checked off toward a living, co-constructed curriculum conversation—with children in play, with their families and with other educators.

As we continue to research and develop *Play, Participation, and Possibilities*, we wish to acknowledge the many thoughtful and dedicated educators who are living curriculum with children and families. We are inspired by the generative nature of this pedagogical collaboration, which helps us in “discovering what we did not yet know how to see” (Wien 2013, 2). Processes that support deep and further complexified thinking about what it means to co-construct curriculum in the here and now with young children are stimulating reflection on children's play, eliciting interpretation and participation in early childhood communities for learning, and inspiring possibilities arising out of everyday living and learning experiences together. These ideas are illuminated in the words of Pam Gudmundson, program coordinator with the Jasper

Place Child and Family Resource Centre in Edmonton:

When a challenge arises in a room with a child or group of children the question we ask now is, “How can I, as the educator, support this child through this . . .” “What is my role in this . . .” . . . I have discovered that this part of the journey is not about finding the answer. It’s about having the conversations with my peers, families and the children, feeling alright with not knowing, but being able to still ask the questions and being aware of all of the important parts. Standing true to my image of the child, but most of all . . . challenging everything I ever thought about each situation. It has been a scary and emotional road . . . but one I wouldn’t trade for anything!⁵

Co-constructing early childhood curriculum and practice is complex and merits time for reflection and interpretation for making meaning of the many perspectives, experiences, ideas and questions of those involved—the children, their families, and educators and other professionals.

Notes

1. *Play, Participation, and Possibilities: An Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Alberta* was funded by a grant from the Government of Alberta, Ministry of Human Services.

2. The Play, Participation, and Possibilities: Transitions and Continuities Project is funded by Alberta Education to field test *Play, Participation, and Possibilities* in participating prekindergarten programs.

3. These goals were reprinted in *Play, Participation, and Possibilities*, with permission, from section 2 (“Goals for Early Learning and Care”) of the *New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care* (University of New Brunswick Early Childhood Centre 2008).

4. The names of all children have been changed.

5. Personal communication in the research context.

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