

Title: It is just play ... isn't it? The Paradox and Power of Play

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Abstract:

Play has a long history in early childhood education and has become an ubiquitous referent in curricular and pedagogical discourse. The literature on play in early childhood locates it as a central process in children's overall development and authors position play in early childhood as critical to children's learning [education], a developmental need [psychological] and a fundamental right.

Play is a contested concept, which is both culturally and contextually bound. Efforts to define it satisfactorily have proved challenging and the response to this has often been to characterise play in early childhood education as a continuum or spectrum from 'free play' through to 'guided play'. Despite this, recommendations on the realisation of play in practice are often vague or unclear.

In his reflections on early childhood programmes, Johansson (2022) noted that Froebel's theory of play was an educational and not a psychological one. Taking this as a starting point, this presentation explores the paradox of play in early childhood as, at once trivial and crucial and asks if, in our efforts to 'understand' play and use it to full effect, we are in fact losing sight of the essence of play and its core value to children?