

Play and Policy in Early Childhood Education in the Asia Pacific Region

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Abstract

The place of play in early childhood curriculum documents in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region is undeniable. Yet the constructs of play in documents from East Asia closely resemble ideas of play that are valued in western early childhood research, textbooks, policy documents and contexts. This policy analysis discusses the changing concepts of play that are promoted in several countries and territories in the Asia-Pacific region. It investigates the challenges these changes present and the contradictions that may arise in regard to local tradition, heritage and culture in three Asia-Pacific contexts: Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Mainland China and Australia. The article shows how policies change over time and provides a poignant representation of how early childhood policy and curriculum aspirations for Hong Kong SAR, Mainland China and Australia might have more in common than in the past.

Keywords: play, policy, curriculum

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This article begins by exploring constructs of play from western perspectives and then takes a brief look at the ideas about play in early childhood education policy documents from several countries in the Asia-Pacific region including Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), Japan, Mainland China, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore. It then identifies contradictions and challenges for cultures with non-European heritages where early childhood curriculum documents adopt western notions of play by using examples from the Hong Kong SAR and the People's Republic of China. Following that, the article considers challenges for early childhood educators in Australia, where play is accorded a significant place in the early years document but the emphasis is different from notions of play that have been valued in the past. While the examples show that challenges exist in the three contexts due to policy and curriculum reform, what is conspicuous is the move toward western ideas of play in the Mainland China and Hong Kong SAR documents and examples, and the move away from a solely child-centred approach in the Australian document. These examples demonstrate the influence of government policy and research, as well as the power of tradition, heritage and culture on what is enacted in early childhood settings. They also provide some insight into how and why policies might be enacted differently.

Western Constructs of Play

Nearly 20 years ago, Gaile Cannella acknowledged the pervasive influence of play in early childhood education: "Virtually all early childhood educators (and many others) espouse play as a sacred right of childhood, as the way in which young human beings learn, as a major avenue through which children learn to be happy, mentally healthy human beings" (Cannella, 1997, p. 124). Since then, the right of all children to play has been included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (adopted 1989), entrenching it as an aspirational value for the 197 countries that have ratified it as at October 2015 (the USA has not). Ratifying the CRC may make it more likely that the Convention is acknowledged in early childhood curriculum documents, such as it is in Australia. Amongst other things drawn from the CRC, *Belonging, being & becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia* (Australian Government [AG], 2009) (the *Framework*) recognizes "Children's right

to play and be active participants in all matters affecting their lives” (p. 5). Ratification of the CRC by the People’s Republic of China led to significant developments in that country regarding the recognition of children and children’s rights, as well as understanding children as active agents as learners, and the importance of play (Liu & Feng, 2005).

Early childhood education curriculum documents that incorporate play often refer to the concept known as ‘free’ or child initiated and directed play. In such approaches children are able to choose what to play from a number of alternatives provided in the classroom for a set period of time. This type of play is generally understood as being freely chosen, personally driven, intrinsically motivated, and mostly child-initiated (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Free play of this type has characterised child centred approaches to early childhood education in the west for more than 100 years. Traditionally, child initiated and directed play has little adult involvement, as children rarely make contact with teachers when they “are engaged in play or other activities chosen by themselves” (Pramling-Samuelson & Johansson, 2009, p. 88). Adult intervention is considered likely to interrupt the autonomy and independence of free play. As a rough guide, in many early childhood settings in Australia, children aged 3-5 years attending a preschool program would be provided with upward of 30 minutes per half-day session of free play opportunities.

Historically, freely chosen and child initiated and directed play has European traditions that date back to the ideas of Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Comenius and Froebel. Rousseau (1762/2007) was particularly attracted to Plato’s ideas about growth and development being “the unfolding of innate ideas” (Weber 1984: 31). He thought that children were inherently good; initiated the idea that freedom and play are natural things for children to do (Rousseau, 1762/2007), and argued for non-intervention in children’s development because of the power of children’s own inner forces that enabled them to make appropriate decisions without adult intervention (Cleverley & Phillips 1987). Rousseau’s influence on child initiated and directed play remains apparent today in some early childhood contexts. The idea of play as central to children’s learning comes from Comenius (1592-1670), who encouraged learning through “playful activity” (Fein, 1999, p. 194). Basing his ideas on Comenius, Pestalozzi (1746-1827) extended the focus on play by including manipulable objects and the importance of the senses. Like his predecessors, Froebel valued play for its potential to enhance children’s growth and development and was most likely the first to fashion what is now known as a curriculum for

the early years, with play as a central tenet that encouraged “self-activity” (Weber, 1984, p. 37). The idea of play being self-activity is the basis of child-centred approaches to early childhood education that grew from these European traditions. It remains an integral part of many contemporary western approaches to early childhood education although in some countries curriculum reform has brought about significant changes to the type of play that is encouraged.

Play and Policy Documents in the Asia-Pacific Region

Play is a central concept in early childhood curriculum documents around the globe, including East and South-East Asian countries, not just countries with European histories and traditions. For instance, the importance of learning through play is evident in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Centre [CDC], 2006), which states: “...play is an indispensable and important tool for facilitating children’s learning” (p. 51); and that “Children’s abilities should be developed through play activities that are inspiring and fun” (p. 13). In the Republic of Korea, Characteristic 4 of the Kindergarten Curriculum highlights the importance of play: “4. This curriculum is realized through the integration of activities and play in the daily life of young children” (The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2007, p. 2). The Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) (2012) identifies six principles to guide teaching and learning in preschool settings, one of which is “engaging children in learning through purposeful play” (p. 26). It also endorses the idea that children learn when they are engaged in play that is enjoyable and thoughtfully planned. In Japan, the basic ideals of kindergarten education recognize the importance of “play-centered instruction” and that play is “a child’s voluntary activity [and]...an important aspect of learning which cultivates a foundation for the balanced development of physical and mental” attributes (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008, p. 1).

Mainland China has been influenced by several curriculum documents, including the *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice* (State Educational Commission [SEC], 1989), the *Kindergarten Education Program Guidelines – Trial Version* (Ministry of

Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2001), and *The National Education Reform and Development of Long-Term Planning Programs (2010–2020)* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2010). After debate about the relationship between play and children's learning that began during the 1980s (Liu & Feng, 2005), the *Regulations* (SEC, 1989) suggested that as a way to respect children and support active learning, kindergartens "provide play as the basic activity" (p. 96). Play as the basic activity subsequently became "one of the critical principles guiding kindergarten educational reforms" (Liu & Feng, 2005, p. 96). One of the aims of providing play was to "protect children's rights to play" (Liu & Feng, 2005, p. 96), which was an alignment that had begun in the 1980s with debate about the CRC and curriculum reform. Ideas about play were formalized in the *Trial Version* (MOE, 2001) and included distinctly western notions such as "respecting children", "active learning", "teaching for individual learning needs", "play-based teaching and learning", and "Teaching and learning through daily life in kindergartens" (Liu & Feng, 2005, p. 94). The next phase of reform, as epitomized in the *National Education Reform* document (MOE, 2010) aims for 95 percent attendance at kindergarten (the year before primary schooling) by 2020, and various schemes are in place to increase quality, provision in rural areas, as well as the number of places for children in the three years before primary school.

These brief statements from policy documents in Hong Kong SAR, Japan, Korea, the People's Republic of China, and Singapore show the place accorded to play in these non-European heritage societies. While Hong Kong and Singapore were colonized by the British and the education systems established reflect elements of the British system, both retain distinctive approaches which are heavily influenced by the culture, history and traditions of their respective local contexts. Hong Kong SAR, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the People's Republic of China, and Singapore, are countries with Confucius traditions and non-European heritage. Confucius philosophy and its associated practices are quite different from the value often ascribed to play in early childhood education in many European heritage societies. Thus there are likely to be different understandings of what play is and how it might be incorporated into learning and teaching in early childhood settings in Confucius heritage cultures (CHC). Teachers are seen as authority figures within Confucian ideology, and this plays a guiding role in the cultures of Hong Kong SAR, Korea, Japan, and China (Guo, 2006; Katyal & Evers, 2007; Li & Wang, 2004). However, an emphasis on European ideas of play

in curriculum documents in Hong Kong SAR and Mainland China, societies with Confucius traditions and in the case of Hong Kong, a history of British colonization, may challenge and in some cases contradict principles and traditions of Confucian ideology.

Play: Examples from Hong Kong SAR and Mainland China

In Hong Kong SAR, there is some resistance to children learning through play in kindergartens as traditional Confucian ideas suggest that play can disturb children's learning and create an obstacle to academic achievement (Ho, 2015; Rao & Li, 2009a). Many kindergartens are academically oriented (Chan, 2012; Chan & Chan, 2003; Ho, 2006; Li, 2004; Rao & Li, 2009b) and teach arithmetic, and reading and writing in Chinese and English as part of the core curriculum. Children as young as four years are required to do homework, and in many cases take dictation and examinations to measure their learning. Teacher-centred approaches are common (Rao, Ng & Pearson, 2010) and include rote learning, group drilling and didactic approaches to teaching young children (Wu 2014). In many kindergartens children have no particular time assigned to free-play (Wu, 2014) and they may be able to engage in free-play time only when they have finished assigned tasks (Li, 2004; Wu, 2014), including homework (Ho, 2015). Yet the Hong Kong SAR government has endorsed the idea of play in the pre-primary curriculum (CDC, 2006, 1996).

In a small study of practical and conceptual aspects of children's play in Hong Kong SAR and German kindergartens, Wu (2014) found that the German teachers associated play with the best learning methods, while none of the Hong Kong teachers linked play with learning and suggested that children needed to acquire knowledge at kindergarten. Many parents and teachers in Hong Kong value teacher-centred approaches (Fung & Lam, 2012), and several studies have reported that parents judge the effectiveness of kindergarten teaching according to children's academic results (Chan & Chan, 2002; Fung & Lam, 2011). Because academic achievement is highly valued, "...parents prefer more writing and drills to play...they will object when they think teachers spend too much time on playing but not teaching" (Fung & Cheng, in Wong, Wang & Cheng, 2011, p. 167). This may be because Chinese parents with a Confucian heritage value "discipline, self-control, hard work, early learning, and academic achievement" (Li, Rao & Tse, 2012, p. 603). In addition, parents in Hong Kong are "...more

likely to see it [play] as an obstacle to children's academic success and future career prosperity" (Wong, Wang & Cheng, 2011, p. 166). Such views from parents are likely to influence teaching approaches.

A study of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers adapting to new teaching approaches found that the idea of a child-centred or play-based approach was at odds with traditional Chinese beliefs and values (Chan, Lam & Ngai, 2000). Another study by Li (2004) indicated that child-centered approaches create conflict for kindergarten teachers, and more recent work by Fung and Lee (2008) has questioned whether kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong have beliefs and practices that are compatible with the child-centred approaches in the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (CDC, 2006). Further, Fung and Lee (2008) reasoned that accountability measures in Hong Kong could cause teachers to resist or creatively adapt the child-centred play based approaches in the *Guide*. Others have noted that little guidance is provided about how to adopt recommendations of the *Guide* such as learning through play, which has resulted in difficulties for teachers in using play based approaches (Cheng, 2006; Rao, Ng & Pearson, 2010; Wong, 2008). These studies indicate that differences among Confucian philosophy, parental views about the role of kindergarten, and principles of free play or child-centred education create challenges for teachers in Confucian heritage cultures such as Hong Kong.

Academic approaches to kindergarten contrast with the globalization of education in Asia in general, and Hong Kong specifically (Kennedy & Lee, 2008). There are many examples of the importation of ideas from western early childhood approaches including Montessori, Reggio Emilia, thematic and project approaches, High Scope, and developmentally appropriate practice (Ho, 2015). Despite the introduction of these approaches as evidence of globalization and westernization, teaching methods seem resistant to their influence and remain fixed on traditional practices (Cheng, 2011; Kennedy & Lee, 2008).

Examples from Mainland China provide both similarities and contrasts with the research from Hong Kong SAR. A small study of play in Shenzhen, Mainland China (Rao & Li, 2009a) concluded that "eduplay", a type of play-based education with "Chinese characteristics" (p. 113), is "an appropriate term to conceptualise teacher practices in Chinese preschools" (p. 113). While the *Regulations* (State Educational Commission, 1989) legitimized play, such approaches are inconsistent with traditional Confucius ideas about education, which focus on

academic achievement and didactic methods. While Rao and Li (2009a) found evidence of direct teaching and that “genuinely free play accounts for only about 17% of activity time in kindergarten” (p. 115), they acknowledged the challenge for practitioners in adopting the play-based ideas in the *Regulations* (SEC, 1989). Confucian ideas of teachers as all knowing, children obeying teachers without question, and learning through didactic methods (Rao & Li, 2009a) provide powerful contrasts to play based approaches that incorporate the concepts of active learning, respecting children, and learning through daily life in kindergartens (Liu & Feng, 2005), as endorsed in the *Trial Version* (MOE, 2001).

An example from a kindergarten in Shanghai provides insight into some of the effects of curriculum change brought about by the *Regulations* (SEC, 1989) and the *Trial Version* (MOE, 2001). In 2000, Shanghai city produced a new guideline for early childhood education, which was based on the same principles as the *Trial Version* (MOE, 2001). It de-emphasised direct instruction and encouraged child-initiated activities, but went “further in its calls for a new direction and in its greater specificity about how to implement change” (Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa, 2009, p. 64). As an example, teachers Cheng and Wang talked about visiting the McDonalds™ set up in the kindergarten that was part of the *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* study (Tobin et al., 2009). Teacher Wang ordered a hamburger, French fries, a pineapple pie and asked how much it was. When told the cost, teacher Wang replied that she didn’t have any money, and asked the boy what she should do. He replied that she should bring the money next time. She then sat down at a table to eat her meal and chat with other customers (see Tobin et al., 2009, p. 62). Another child ran to her to tell her that someone was crying in the beauty salon and she replied, “Really, why is she crying?” (p. 62), and returned to eating and chatting. While teacher Wang was eating, the police attended to the matter of the child crying in the beauty salon.

In the context of the McDonalds™ example and teacher non-intervention, teachers Cheng and Wang explained how they came to encourage child-initiated activities:

Cheng laoshi [teacher]: When the children ran into problems in the new settings they created [such as the beauty salon] they would turn to us [teachers] for solutions. We listened carefully to understand their concerns and we found that the issues the children brought up could be woven back into their play to enrich the complexity. So we decided to join the children in their play, and in the process we found ways to introduce new problems for them to work out.

Wang laoshi: At the moment we become playmates with the children, we stop being teachers. They

invite us to their “home” or “store”, we are just guests or customers. As guests or customers, we act like children would in the play, and do not provide adult guidance. (Tobin et al., 2009, pp. 69-70)

In analysing these events, Tobin et al. discussed the introduction of complexity and the necessity for problem solving through teacher Wang having no money to pay for her meal; and the lack of intervention in the beauty salon, which required the “beauticians and the police to work things out”, which they did (p. 70). Tobin and colleagues called this “artful and unobtrusive scaffolding of child-initiated activities”, which they suggest “raised the level of the...social, emotional and cognitive complexity” of the interactions (p. 70). The more detailed examples in Tobin et al. (2009) have some resonance with the notion of sustained shared thinking (SST) identified in the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study in England (discussed soon) (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004).

As these examples from Hong Kong SAR and Mainland China indicate, the Hong Kong kindergarten teachers experienced challenges incorporating European or western versions of play into the curriculum. The example from Shenzhen (Rao & Li, 2009a) shows a hybrid or fusion of traditional practices and play-based approaches called eduplay, and the Shanghai case shows how teachers in one kindergarten engaged in curriculum change by reducing direct instruction and creating innovative ways to encourage child-initiated play that included increasing the complexity of the play. There are also challenges for early childhood educators in countries such as Australia where the introduction of a mandated learning framework that endorses a combination of intentional teaching, child-initiation and play based learning requires changes to the approaches adopted by many educators in the past (Grieshaber, 2010). Using Australia as an example, challenges for teachers are identified given the requirements of *Belonging, being & becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia* (AG, 2009).

Play and the Australian Early Years Learning Framework

Consistent with child-centred approaches to early childhood education, ideas of child initiated and directed play are infused with the sense that adults should have little involvement

in children's play (Pramling-Samuelson & Johansson, 2009). But *Belonging, being & becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia* (AG, 2009) suggests otherwise, indicating a change from previous approaches to early childhood education in Australia (Grieshaber, 2010). According to Dockett (2011), child-centred approaches to play "promote the role of educators as observers and facilitators of play, reflecting a focus on play as a child-directed, rather than teacher directed, activity" (p. 32). Educators as observers and facilitators of children's play reflect the strong influence of Piagetian ideas where educators tended to be responsive to children initiating play, and supported the construction of ideas as children interacted with resources and peers (Bennett, Wood & Rogers, 1997). Mounting research from Britain (e.g., Bennett et al., 1997) that questioned aspects of play resulted in the British Educational Research Association Early Childhood Special Interest Group (2003) releasing a statement indicating that "play should be planned and purposeful...should provide children with challenging and worthwhile activities [where] practitioners are encouraged to interact with children and provide a richly resourced learning environment" (p. 16). This pedagogy of play incorporated a dual approach of "teacher-directed and child-initiated play" (p. 16). Similar ideas are reflected in the Australian *Framework* (AG, 2009) and present a number of challenges for educators because of the long-established and "revered" position of child initiated and directed play in early childhood settings (Dockett, 2011).

The focus on child-directed play has been challenged by a number of evolving ideas that include questioning "the developmental discourse that has characterised Western notions of play"; recognizing the diversity of "ways in which children learn...the increasing demands to start academic education earlier...the role of individual teachers [in play]...the changing nature and experience of play as children engage with popular culture and a range of technologies...[and the] considerable variation in the quality of children's play, particularly in relation to child-adult interactions and cognitive challenge" (Dockett, 2011, pp. 34-5). Emerging from these challenges has come the idea of play-based pedagogy, where not only learning through play, but also teaching through play is emphasized. This is realised in the Australian *Framework* through the prominence of intentional teaching and play-based learning.

The *Framework* (AG, 2009) took a distinctly different approach from what had occurred in the past in Australia, which was characterized by an emphasis on children's growth and

development (as opposed to a focus on learning); child initiated and directed play (rather than play-based learning that supported intentional teaching); and attached little, if any importance to diversity, outcomes or high expectations (Grieshaber, 2010). *The Framework* focused on matters that had not commonly been part of early childhood education documents such as pedagogy, reconciliation, equity, diversity, theoretical eclecticism (as opposed to child developmental theories), and the idea that play is “infused with power” (Sumsion, Barnes, Cheeseman, Harrison, Kennedy, & Stonehouse, 2009, p. 10). The change was based on research that shows teachers have important roles in initiating as well as supporting and developing children’s play to improve cognitive, social and behavioural development. Based on the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study in England that showed that the quality of adult-child interactions (e.g., sustained shared thinking) makes a difference to children’s outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; Sylva et al., 2004), the *Framework* refers to educators and children engaging in “sustained concentration” (p. 10, 45), “sustained communication” (p. 40), “sustained shared thinking” (p. 5), “sustained shared thinking and collaborative learning” (p. 16), and “sustained shared conversations with children to extend thinking” (p. 15).

The importance of sustained shared thinking (SST) and the difference the quality of adult-child interactions makes to outcomes was shown by the 12 case centres in the EPPE study that achieved “good to excellent child development outcomes” (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010, p. 149). More sustained shared thinking (SST) among staff and children occurred in ‘excellent’ than in ‘good’ settings, that is, where “two or more individuals ‘worked together’ in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative...[and] both parties had to be contributing to the thinking and it had to be shown to develop and extend thinking” (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010, p. 157). Staff engaged in open-ended questioning, provided formative feedback, and modelled skills or appropriate behaviour that resulted in developing and extending children’s understanding, which ultimately led to improved child outcomes. The EPPE study also showed that two-thirds of child-initiated activities in the ‘excellent’ centres were extended by adults and significantly, that “Cognitive challenge was provided by the staff without dominating the activities” (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010, p. 158). This suggests that the staff were skilled in achieving that fine balance between children initiating ideas and conversations, and adult support and extension of these to

enhance thinking. Further, free play activities “often provided the best opportunities for adults to extend children’s thinking” (p. 158), and it was qualified teachers who used “the most sustained shared thinking interactions” (p. 161).

The Australian *Framework* (AG, 2009) requires educators to combine learning through play with intentional teaching and SST, and emphasizes the “planned or intentional aspects of the curriculum” (p. 9). Like the EPPE study, Australian researchers have identified the importance of teachers engaging actively with children’s play and as part of that, extending their learning through including content knowledge (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011; Fler, 2010, 2015; Krieg, 2011). This might occur with educators positioning themselves alongside children as co-inquirers (Krieg, 2011), or, as New Zealand researchers Hedges and Cullen (2012) suggest, taking an active role in children’s play and scaffolding their learning. Australian researchers have also noted that the *Framework* uses language associated with what is required of qualified teachers (Grieshaber & Graham, 2015), including terms such as learning, assessment for learning, intentional teaching and pedagogy/ies (Grieshaber, 2010; Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011). For Ortlipp et al. (2011), the use of such terms signals movement from discourses of nurturing and care to those of teaching and accountability. They also propose that learning outcomes (like those in the *Framework*) can be associated with more technicist approaches to early childhood education.

As well as the challenge of balancing child-initiated ideas with play based learning and intentional teaching to enhance children’s understanding, the *Framework* (AG, 2009) requires educators to assist children to achieve outcomes, and as part of that, engage with content (Grieshaber, 2010; Krieg, 2011). However, as Hedges (2014), Rogers (2011) and Wood (2013) argue, discussion about free play in early childhood education raises tensions when content, learning, pedagogy, and outcomes are considered alongside play. Tensions arise for several reasons: the inclusion of and/or focus on content in curriculum documents (e.g., the *Framework*) (Krieg, 2011); the lack of confidence in content knowledge by early childhood teachers in Australia and New Zealand (Hedges, 2014); research that suggests that where teachers are required to move between child and teacher-initiated approaches, that teacher-led approaches tend to dominate (see Wood, 2013); child-centred approaches that lack a focus on content (Broström, 2013); teacher lack of confidence in mathematical content knowledge that compromises learning (Anning & Edwards, 2006), and lack content knowledge and the

associated risk of providing inaccurate scientific information (see Grieshaber, 2008).

Before the *Framework* (AG, 2009) was developed in Australia, there was little talk of content and assessment; and much more knowledge and understanding of monitoring children's growth and development in traditional areas of child development. According to Krieg (2011), the *Framework* has begun the important work of "articulating effective aspects of teaching and learning in the early years" (p. 53) and that "repositioning of content knowledge in early childhood pedagogy opens up new possibilities for children's learning" (p. 53). Thus content knowledge has assumed new meaning in the *Framework* as educators are required to extend children's understanding in literacy and numeracy and assist children to achieve the many indicators and sub-outcomes of five broad learning outcomes (more than half of the document consists of indicators, sub-outcomes and outcomes). The skill of educators comes to the fore when they are able to locate themselves within play based teaching and learning interactions (similar to SST) and "recognise and act on possible links between play and content in a genuine way" (Hedges, 2014, p. 200). And this often depends on the moment-by-moment interactions that are taking place in the play.

Recognizing possible links between child-initiated play and relevant content requires an understanding of related content knowledge and the ability to act to make authentic links between the play and pertinent content at the right time. To Hedges (2014), two possibilities for content learning include "immersion in the curriculum resources provided in a prepared environment and...the pedagogical mediation of knowledgeable teachers during child-initiated interactions" (p. 200). There is also the challenge of extending children's knowledge and understanding, that is, of educators taking children's understanding beyond what is already known in the context of pedagogical mediation in child-initiated play. An in-depth understanding of the learning outcomes and associated content knowledge positions educators professionally to be able to make genuine links between child initiated play and content, and assist children's learning in ways that support them to achieve the outcomes.

As a major change, the focus on content and outcomes in the *Framework* (AG, 2009) could potentially impose a sense of order and a disposition toward creating predictable processes that are aimed at ensuring children achieve the outcomes (e.g., intentional teaching to/of the outcomes); especially as educator responsibility for learning and assessment has been formalised in a national quality assurance/regulatory system (the National Quality Standard)

and national body called the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACEQA), established in 2011. There are seven areas of quality that are assessed, with the following examples provided from Quality Areas 1 and 5 to give an idea of what is required of educators in regard to content, intentional teaching, learning and assessment. In Quality Area 1 – *Educational program and practice*, the National Quality Standard (NQS) requires (amongst other things) that “Each child's learning and development is assessed as part of an ongoing cycle of planning, documenting and evaluation” (Element 1.2.1, Quality Area 1); and “Educators respond to children's ideas and play and use intentional teaching to scaffold and extend each child's learning” (Element 1.2.2, Quality Area 1) (ACECQA, 2015). In Quality Area 5 – *Relationships with children*, the NQS requirement is that “Every child is able to engage with educators in meaningful, open interactions that support the acquisition of skills for life and learning” (Element 5.1.2, Quality Area 5) (ACECQA, 2016).

Enacting the fine balance between child-initiated play and intentional teaching to realize outcomes can be demanding, as child initiated and directed play privileges change and fluidity over pre-planning, evolution over equilibrium, and complexity over predictability. While many educators are familiar with child initiated and directed play, its complexity, and the ways it can change moment by moment; they might not be so familiar with making intentional teaching a genuine part of child-initiated play, especially drawing on relevant content at the ‘teachable moment’ and knowing how specific content and child initiated play link to the 25 pages of outcomes in the *Framework* (AG, 2009). In such circumstances it could be tempting to stay with the known and monitor children's growth in the traditional areas of child development.

Conclusion: Pedagogies Make a Difference

Early childhood curriculum approaches and policy documents in Hong Kong SAR, Mainland China and Australia seem to have some resonance with each other, despite histories in broad terms, of teacher centred approaches characterizing early childhood education in Hong Kong and Mainland China, and child-centred approaches featuring in Australian early childhood settings. The value of play is espoused in the documents from each but it is

decisions by educators about pedagogies and how they are enacted in a daily basis that deserve comment. In broad terms, the *Regulations* (SEC, 1989), the *Trial Version* (MOE, 2001), and the *Hong Kong Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum* (CDC, 2006) highlight play as an important way of learning and downplay academic and didactic approaches. The *Framework* (AG, 2009) places more importance on the role of educators and the intent to enhance children's thinking, content knowledge and achievement of outcomes through play based learning and intentional teaching, than solely on child-centred approaches, where there is likely to be less educator intervention and intentional teaching. Accounting for this move toward less 'structure' in the policy documents from Mainland China and Hong Kong; and intentional teaching through play-based learning in the Australian document requires both macro and micro perspectives.

The social, political, economic and cultural contexts in which children play and attend early childhood institutions have changed, as have the economic and human capital goals that specific countries have adopted. The place of play in the policies demonstrates the influence of government agendas, recent research in early childhood education, and social and historical change. Policies in Hong Kong SAR and Mainland China reflect the movement of ideas from the west (Cheng, 2011; Kennedy & Lee, 2008), specifically in regard to play, but it is how those ideas are taken up in practice that makes a difference. While play may appear in the *Hong Kong Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum* (CDC, 2006) in various forms, research in Hong Kong kindergartens shows that teaching methods and pedagogies remain resistant to the notion of child initiated and directed play, suggesting that if children do have opportunities to play then it is likely to be used as an instrument for teaching specific skills, meeting particular standards, or increasing performance on tests. The apparent emphasis is teaching (rather than learning), which is consistent with teacher centred approaches that reflect Confucius traditions (Rao et al., 2010); and appears to be a case of teaching methods or pedagogy "informing children's play" (Rogers, 2011, p. 25). That is, the type of play that occurs is determined by the teaching methods used, so it is the teaching methods or pedagogies adopted in classrooms that make the difference. In contrast, the example from Shanghai shows how, based on ongoing professional discussion and decision-making by the teachers, children's play was likely to "inform[ed] classroom pedagogy" (rather than teaching methods informing play) (Rogers, 2011, p. 25).

In Australia, the *Framework* (AG, 2009) has direct links to government priorities that include health, closing the gap of disadvantage, and human capital aims of future success in learning, and the success of the nation. As interpreting and enacting the *Framework* occurs in local contexts such as individual classrooms, educators make decisions about whether play informs pedagogies or whether teaching methods inform and determine the type of play that occurs in the setting; or whether a blend of both approaches is adopted and how this might occur. These decisions take part in the context of children engaging with content and striving to achieve the outcomes identified in the *Framework*. Given the policy contexts, curriculum guidelines/frameworks and research discussed in this article relating to Hong Kong SAR, Mainland China and Australia, there seems to be more in common (at least in policy documents) than might have been supposed. In each context, educators have been required to take curriculum reform into account in their daily practices and make changes that require, in some circumstances, significantly different approaches from what has been the case in the past; or had to confront requirements that contrast with cultural values and traditions. There are no simple solutions to complex challenges, especially where established practices, cultural values and traditions are concerned. Whatever the context, where educational reform is desired, a comprehensive approach is required that addresses pre-service teacher education as well as dimensions of structural and process quality such as staff qualifications, ongoing professional learning, and adult-child ratios.

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