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Modes of play in early childhood curricular documents in Brazil, New Zealand and Ontario

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood policies internationally have been informed by evidence that participation in early childhood education makes a positive difference to children's learning and development. Attempts to understand the purposes and value of play within early childhood policy frameworks have produced various curricular documents across international contexts. This paper employs text analysis linked to Wood's [2014. The play-pedagogy interface in contemporary debates. In L. Brooker, M. Blaise, & S. Edwards (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of play and learning in early childhood* (pp. 145–156). London: Sage.] three modes of play – child-initiated play, adult-guided play, and a technician version of educational play – to identify where curricula in three different countries in diverse parts of the world currently sit within educational discourse. We provide a brief historical and contextual overview of curriculum policy influences in each country. We then analyse curricular documents in relation to Wood's modes. We argue that shifts in policy frameworks are moving towards technician and didactic uses of play. Furthermore, these uses are inconsistent with research that indicates what supports children to learn and thrive in contemporary contexts.

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Introduction

Many governments worldwide have increased their investment in early childhood education (ECE). In what ways is play, a concept long-valued by the ECE sector, made explicit in curricular frameworks in order to meet associated policy agendas? In this paper we examine conceptualisations of play embedded in ECE curricular policy frameworks in geographically diverse parts of the world: Brazil, New Zealand (NZ), and Ontario, a Canadian province. We examine current curricular documents (and past versions where there have been multiple versions over time) contextualizing our analysis within social, political and economic phenomena that were influential to the development of these. We used text analysis methods (Goldman & Wiley, 2011) to identify ways in which the word *play* is

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represented in these documents using Wood's (2014) three modes of conceptualizing the play-pedagogy interface. We argue for continuing to build understandings of child-initiated and adult-guided play and caution against tendencies toward more technicist views appearing in the policy discourse.

Competing views on play in ECE

All stakeholders involved in ECE are keen that children's experiences give them a good start in life. Research evidence across international contexts is conclusive that ECE provision can make a positive difference to children's learning and development, especially for children from low-income families (e.g. Montie, Xiang, & Schweinhart, 2006). Over time, ECE has undergone many changes, notably from intensive policy interventions that have aimed to integrate services and provision for children and families across education, health, and social care. Many of the policies and frameworks have been informed by research and theory. However, whose and which research and theory dominates has changed over time. Psychology, and in particular educational psychology, have long held sway over ECE curriculum (Wood & Hedges, 2016). Government-funded educational effectiveness research (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, 2015; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010) has demonstrated the contributions of ECE to children's cognitive, language, literacy and other knowledge, linking this to their readiness for formal schooling. Further, governments may become conscious, for example, of educational experts discussing data such as PISA (Collins, 2017), and want to create ECE and primary programs that focus on social, linguistic and cognitive skills to prepare children for academic success and competitiveness in the global economy. However, a 'too much too soon' approach through the use of didactic pedagogies in ECE when children are very young is debatable as an approach that leads to positive life course outcomes. Instead, some research on ECE investment suggests that social-pedagogic outcomes that arise from play and relationship-based approaches to ECE serve children better as both important outcomes in themselves and as a lead-in to academic learning (Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov, 2006).

In short, the relationship between play, learning, curriculum, pedagogy, outcomes, and policy has long been recognized as complex. Play takes a primary role in the research, theory, curriculum, and pedagogy of ECE in many western countries because it is viewed as a way that young children participate in learning about social and cultural practices, and as a way for children to express and practice creative ideas and thinking that can lead to later academic learning. Examples can be found in France (Brougère, 2005); the United Kingdom (UK) (Hunter & Walsh, 2014); New Zealand (Hedges & Cullen, 2012); Sweden (Pramling-Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2009); the United States (Roskos & Christie, 2009); and the Netherlands (van Oers & Duijkers, 2013).

Beyond this recognition of play there is a wide range of understandings of the purposes and influences of play in young children's lives (Bergen, 2014). This diversity can be explained by the varying cultural, political, technological, and economic dimensions of social life across the centuries and across cultures and by the polysemic nature of play (Brougère, 1995). Researchers and theorists from many disciplines such as education, psychology, sociology, history, and anthropology have contributed a diversity of perspectives on play (Gaskins, 2014). More recently, contemporary research has moved play towards a

more secure evidence base of its value in learning and pedagogy. Research on play highlights its potential for learning (Wood, 2013), especially if teachers can utilize play in an exploratory way that follows children's natural motivations and interests (e.g. Hedges & Cooper, 2014), and lead, for example, to opportunities for rich oral language and story telling that, in turn, later can enrich writing (Peterson, 2015; Wajskop & Peterson, 2015). Scholars also identify some of the complexities and dilemmas of play (Wood, 2013) and some growing conflict of interests between play and pedagogy (Wood, 2014).

Our argument draws on Wood's (2014) three modes of understanding the play-pedagogy interface within present discourses of educational play. Wood describes Mode A, child-initiated play, as having historical roots in the late eighteenth-century liberal-humanist and Romantic movements. An emphasis on children's freedom and natural development was a response to the oppressive and controlling working conditions that came with increased industrialization. Mode A draws on Froebel (1887) and Rousseau (1762/1921) to theorize play as a natural childhood activity that supports children's exploration and discoveries about their world. Learning occurs through child-initiated goals and motivations.

Mode B, adult-guided play, draws on Vygotskian notions of play as foundational to learning and to children's socialization (e.g. Bodrova & Leong, 2007; van Oers, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Guided by Mode A assumptions of the intrinsic value of children's free play for their learning and development *and* the potential contributions of adults' and cultural mediation to foster specific learning, Mode B encourages a focus on pedagogical relationships and an exploratory and educative view of play, including explicit encouragement of language and conceptual development. In this way, we argue that children retain some of the freedom of Mode A and also have some agency in the direction and pace of their learning through the Mode B engagements and interactions with others and with cultural objects that foster learning more explicitly. We align our position with those who advocate for learning process outcomes, such as an ability to develop dispositions for learning (Carr, 2001; Carr et al., 2009) that set them up for lifelong learning and success.

In Mode C, play is a vehicle for achieving learning outcomes defined by curriculum policy that is often a push-down from primary curriculum and focuses on academic learning. Wood identifies the pedagogical goals of Mode C as more instrumental and technicist than Modes A and B in that play activities are planned with adults' subject-driven curriculum objectives in mind. She argues that play is 'valued not for what it is but for what it leads to in educational terms' (p. 153). Wood argues that in her context, England, there have been various iterations of the curricular policy document that have shifted towards more academic emphases and Mode C approaches (Department for Education, 2012; Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, 2008). This mode therefore puts the onus on adults to intervene in play to direct children's thinking, intentions and activities toward those that help them to achieve academic outcomes. In addition to narrowing the possibilities for children's learning to those prescribed by the curriculum, Mode C approaches carry the risk of children becoming disengaged in learning and losing, amongst many possibilities besides positive dispositions for learning, playfulness and joy in their everyday life interactions, and the creative and critical thinking capacities needed in contemporary societies.

These diverse perspectives provide rich but confusing understandings. The shifts in the modes illustrate that play is now constructed as a complex political and

relational space, not just the natural child-centered activity of young children that may lead to learning. This space raises challenging questions, about play and its purposes and emphases in curricular policy documents, about children's relationships with the physical learning environments in ECE settings, the role of child-peer and child-adult relationships and interactions, and about the impact of teacher practices. The next section considers these questions in relation to the curricular documents in the contexts of the three authors. As we analyse these documents we justify our advocating for mode B: play as a primary presence in ECE for adults to use sensitively in reciprocal pedagogical relationships to guide children's learning in matters of interest to them. In this way we support the emphases of research findings that indicate that play-based curricula with Mode B pedagogical approaches are more successful for longer term outcomes (e.g. Marcon, 2002; Montie et al., 2006) and that social-pedagogical and learning process outcomes may be more important at this stage, as they provide a foundation for academic outcomes (Bennett, 2005; Carr et al., 2009).

Contexts and services

We use the term ECE in this paper to cover the broad range of services that children experience in Brazil, New Zealand (NZ), and Ontario. In Brazil, ECE covers broad provision for children aged birth to 5 years. Childcare centers are available for children from birth to 3 years, and pre-school, sited within primary schools and mandatory since 2010, serve children aged 4 to 5 years. In NZ, ECE encompasses children aged birth to 5 years. Provision occurs in a range of public, private, and community settings which provide a mix of full-day and part-day services. In Ontario, ECE encompasses birth to 6 years. There are licensed and unlicensed full-day childcare centers for children from birth to 4 years of age, with some public funding based on need. Children aged 4 to 6 years attend full-day publicly-funded kindergarten.

Methods

We used text analysis methods (Goldman & Wiley, 2011) to identify frequencies of the use of the word *play* in curriculum documents from these three contexts. We did not include use of the word to describe the role that something *plays* in learning, nor the use of the word in compound words such as *playground*. The following findings outline briefly the history of ECE in each context, the documents analysed and the views of play within these in relation to Wood's three modes.

History of ECE governance in Brazil

The history of ECE in Brazil is linked to struggles for better conditions of life, women's rights, and workforce policies. ECE policies have taken up compensatory approaches geared toward poverty eradication (Campos, Rosemberg, & Ferreira, 1995; Kuhlmann, 2000). Brazil champions complementarity between education and care, and integrity in the child's development.

The right to ECE came from three historical stages:

- (1) From the beginning of child assistance to re-democratization (1875–1985);
- (2) Period of the National Constituent Assembly, enactment of the Federal Constitution and the drafting of laws that regulate children's rights (1986–1996);
- (3) Public debates and policies aiming to fulfill children's rights (from 1996 to today). (Nunes, Corsino, & Didonet, 2010).

Kindergartens have been in existence in private schools since the 1880s and have taken up child-centered education approaches and compensatory theories, whereas daycare centers have taken a welfare, care-focused approach. Most of them were founded by Catholic and Baptist Churches (Kuhlmann, 2000) and were based on a Mode C view of children's play. In the 1930s at São Paulo, the first early childhood public program took up a Mode A approach of children's play activity as a developmental and cultural context for education (Faria, 1999). Although in the 1970s most of the public senior kindergarten classrooms belonged to primary schools, the first National Framework of Childhood Education (Ministério da Educação e Cultura, 1979) was developed (Kramer, 1984). This document took a Mode A view of play activities considered as a challenge to the child's curiosity and imagination to create storytelling and story meanings. Through play, the child organizes his own little world and develops his mind (Ministério da Educação e Cultura, 1979, p. 59).

All services came together within the Ministry of Education in 1988. The new statement of Brazilian Laws brought a child-centered approach with a mode B view of children's play activities to a conceptual and legal basis for ECE. Children became represented to society as capable instead in need of care. ECE became children's right for education and care as citizens, in contrast to previous authoritarian, paternalistic, and repressive approaches (Nunes et al., 2010).

Subsequent Brazilian laws and documents ensured children's legal rights to support for their development and cultural inclusion, including the right to play in ECE settings. These are based on political, ethical, and aesthetic principles from the National Mandatory documents (e.g. Conselho Nacional de Educação, 1999; Ministério da Educação, 2010), which advocate that every child has the right to play, express her/himself, and learn in a healthy and respectful local culture that is play-based and provides opportunities for language experiences and knowledge environments (Ministério da Educação, 2010, p. 16). Although inequalities still exist, important progress occurred regarding attendance and quality in childhood education. Although legislation mandated that all ECE teachers would have a bachelor's degree that included pedagogical courses and practice teaching based on the same principles, almost 40% of teachers do not yet have this qualification (Cruz & Monteiro, 2016).

Play in Brazilian curriculum documents

The National Pedagogical Framework for children aged up to 6 years, *Referencial Curricular Nacional para Educação Infantil* (RCNEI) (Ministério da Educação e do Desporto, 1998) is a non-mandatory document. RCNEI was developed over a two-year period (1997–1998) and involved, as in New Zealand, significant consultation with scholars and teachers. There was broad debate about the binomial approach of education and

care that concluded with promoting the notion of free play in a Mode B view of children's activities that honored children's rights, diversity, and curiosity.

Although the Ministry of Education has produced subsequent documents, the original national curriculum is still current, guiding practitioner framework policies through three documents: (1) Introductory; (2) Individual and Social Education; (3) Sciences, Arts, Language and Math knowledge. The whole document is based on a non-prescriptive approach, which interweaves five principles related to children's rights: (1) wellbeing, (2) socialization, (3) care, (4) education, and (5) play.

The three books take a Mode B view of exploratory and pedagogical play as a cultural and developmental resource for children's learning. Teachers and practitioners are responsible for observing and providing equipment and resources to support children's play; fostering children's ideas and actions through materials, routines and spaces; and are described as mediators of learning. Notwithstanding a Mode B view of play there are some didactic activities proposed, which signals a shift to Mode C in the document.

In the 103 pages of the introductory book, the word play appears 63 times. There is a research-based definition of play included that blends Piagetian (1945) and sociocultural theories of play. Adults are expected to organize time, materials, and indoor and outdoor environments to promote children's free and imaginative play. In the 85 pages of the second book, play appears 68 times. It is described as a free activity that improves 'important capacities, such as attention, imitation, memory, imagination' (Ministério da Educação e do Desporto, 1998, v.2, p. 22). In the 209 pages of the third book, play appears 137 times. Here, play is described as a pedagogical strategy and adults are expected to plan activities to improve knowledge building. This raises a dilemma in pedagogy. Play is particularly referred to in expressive languages such as Arts, Music and Movement. A Mode C approach is taken when linked to Sciences, Language and Maths knowledge. The underlying assumption is that every child has the right to play, express her/himself, and learn in a healthy and respectful local culture that is play-based and provides opportunities for language experiences and knowledge environments (Ministério da Educação, 2010).

Fifteen years later, a new approach is being developed and the focus has shifted from learning outcomes to a rights-based approach, suggesting a move from Mode C towards Modes A and B.

Base Nacional Comum Curricular (Ministério da Educação, 2015) is a document still under public discussion. It is intended to provide mandatory standards to supporting institutions and teacher education programs outlining experiences and general Rights to Learning to be implemented in each local childhood institution. It advocates five rights that must be met in ECE, considering the ways in which babies and children learn about themselves and others, and make sense of their social and natural world, and the fundamental requirements of contemporary life.

This document states that children have the right to: (1) live with others; (2) play by participating in diverse activities; (3) explore spaces, objects, and environmental places; (4) express themselves in multiple languages; and (5) know themselves and others. The document suggests that ECE centers and teachers must organize experiences based on sociocultural practices from diverse communities and multiple languages. The RCNEI and the document in progress reflect Modes A and B as they advocate that ECE offers challenging play experiences that provide contexts for children to develop emotional, social, and cultural knowledge as well as attitudes of curiosity, inquiry, and delight. As

such, this document has close links to the *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) guiding ECE programs in New Zealand, as described in the next section.

History of ECE governance and curriculum in New Zealand

May (2009, 2013) has identified much of the historical, political, and cultural landscape of the development and change of ECE provision in NZ, including services focused on reinvigorating and maintaining Māori and Pasifika heritage languages. Issues of women's rights and economic policies enabling women's participation in the workforce became prominent in the 1960s and continue currently. As in Brazil, all services came together under the auspices of the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 1988. Originally referred to as 'early education and care' services, blending the original aims of health, welfare, and education provision, a range of terminology persists due to a variety of ownership and governance models. The ministry provides partial funding for children attending every center and has current policies to achieve a goal of 98% of children participating in ECE prior to attending school, usually at the age of 5 years.

The NZ ECE curriculum document, *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 1996) was developed over a three-year period and involved significant consultation with the sector. It has been recognized and lauded internationally as a non-prescriptive and forward-looking document, particularly with regard to its emphasis on maintaining and valuing the indigenous Māori language and culture for all NZ children (Ritchie & Buzzelli, 2012). It describes an interweaving of four principles – empowerment, relationships, family and community, and holistic development – with five strands – belonging, wellbeing, contribution, communication, and exploration – as the basis for constructing curriculum. The two main outcomes of the curriculum are learning dispositions and working theories, described as ways knowledge, skills and strategies, and attitudes and expectations combine. Research has helped make more explicit the ways learning dispositions and working theories might be understood as foundational, holistic outcomes for children's learning (Carr & Lee, 2012; Hedges & Cooper, 2014; Hedges & Cullen, 2012).

Te Whāriki has remained as the guidance for curriculum in NZ ECE since. However, policies supporting its implementation have been variable over the years and the document and sector have come under some local scrutiny. Some scholars and policymakers have questioned its efficacy, particularly the lack of literacy emphasis and outcomes (e.g. Blaiklock, 2010), and quality of implementation (e.g. Early Childhood Education Taskforce report, 2011; Education Review Office, 2013). A group of key academics wrote a response to these concerns in 2013 and attempted to develop the strands of *Te Whāriki* as outcomes more explicitly, but this document was not publicly released. Meantime the language of 'early education and care' has shifted to 'early learning' on the Ministry of Education website and documents. The sector and the curriculum escaped formal review until recently; a review of *Te Whāriki* is currently in progress at the time of writing (MOE, 2016) following an advisory group report (MOE, 2015).

Play in the New Zealand ECE curriculum document

Te Whāriki signaled a major change in the way children were viewed. Rather than as dependent and in need of care, the aspiration statement views children as capable,

competent, and confident. The open nature of *Te Whāriki* means that individual ECE centers and teachers are able to weave their own contextually-appropriate curriculum content. Adults as educators are described as mediators of learning through ‘reciprocal and responsive relationships for children with people, places, and things’ (MOE, 1996, p. 9).

Early on, Cullen (1996, 2003) questioned teachers’ ability to interpret and action a non-prescriptive document, and whether or not they would shift from then dominant developmental theoretical interpretations that reflected a Mode A romantic conceptualization of play to more Mode B socioculturally-inclined ones that enable both exploratory and educative approaches. Certainly, a non-prescriptive curriculum requires significant teacher professional knowledge to interpret it and utilize play appropriately (Hedges, 2013).

In the 100-page document (MOE, 1996, with 13 pages written in Māori or Māori and English) the word *play* appears 64 times. In relation to the analytic framing of this article, *Te Whāriki* strongly reflects the conceptualization of play as enabling exploration and knowledge building from a Mode A perspective. Its first mention is in relation to the value of play for children in one of the goals for the strand of exploration: ‘their play is valued as meaningful learning and the importance of spontaneous play is recognised’ (p. 13). It next appears in exemplifying three of the principles: empowerment ‘Play activities in early childhood education invite rather than compel participation’ (p. 40); holistic development ‘opportunities for open-ended exploration and play’ (p. 41), and relationships ‘appropriate and interesting play materials are provided that children can change and interact with’ (p. 43). It exhorts adults to provide ‘appropriate and interesting play materials’ (p. 51) and specific follow up suggestions around for example, sand, dough, paints, socio-dramatic play, carpentry, story-telling, film making, projects, and investigations. The importance of both appropriate and challenging play experiences is reinforced.

The document also has strong elements that reflect a Mode B educative frame. *Te Whāriki* has 48 references to the role of adults in children’s play. The greater proportion of these (25 references) include provision of play equipment and resources which could also be interpreted as assuming from a Mode A free play perspective to foster a range of competences. The ways play fosters children’s learning numbers 19 uses of the word *play*. These reflect ideas that play ‘is valued as meaningful learning’ (pp. 13 & 97) and emphasize that children can build social, emotional, cognitive, and language/communicative competences through play. The strand of exploration focuses most on this area, suggesting that children ‘experience open-ended exploration and play in an environment where the consistent, warm relationships help to connect the child’s experiences and where the tasks, activities, and contexts all have meaning for the child’ (p. 98). Two uses suggest a clear and proactive adult contribution through ensuring that each child’s culture and language is represented, and offering language input to increase children’s knowledge – specifically language and mathematics are noted – and foster creative and critical thinking. In addition, the statement that adults should ‘know how to support and extend children’s play without interrupting or dominating the activity and should avoid unnecessary intervention’ (p. 98) signals an educative focus on interactions that avoids a technician mode C overlay of utilizing play in adult-led ways to achieve prescribed outcomes.

Certainly, given that the document was released in 1996, over time, shifts in theoretical positioning have seen *Te Whāriki* viewed as a primarily sociocultural rather than psychological document (Anning, Cullen, & Flear, 2009; Hedges, 2013) implying that the notion of respectful, reciprocal, and responsive relationships is interpreted more actively to include adults engaging with children's learning interests and capabilities in ways aligned with Mode B as appropriate opportunities arise.

One element noted for attention in the current revision of *Te Whāriki* is the learning outcomes. The sector waits for this revision cautiously guarded having observed moves internationally to revise curricula in ways that encourage a Mode C use of play and make academic outcomes more explicit, illustrated next by the various iterations of documents in Ontario.

History of ECE governance in Ontario

Each of Canada's 10 provinces and two territories has its own history of early childhood education, as provincial and territorial governments have full jurisdiction over kindergarten to secondary education, in Ontario, junior kindergartens for 4–5 year-old children and senior kindergartens for 5–6 year-old children have been in existence in private schools since 1883 and in public schools since 1943 (Corbett, 1989). Kindergarten was offered as a half-day program until 2010 when school boards were required to offer full-day kindergarten co-taught by a certified teacher and a designated early childhood educator (identified as the Early Learning-Kindergarten team). Neither junior nor senior kindergarten is mandatory for children, although school boards are required to provide both programs, as well as before-and after-school programs for kindergarten students at schools where at least 20 children's families express an interest (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Six Ontario kindergarten program documents have been created since 1944, with decades between the early programs (e.g. Ontario Department of Education, 1944, 1966; Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998) and then a handful of years between the latter programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, 2010/11, 2016). Early kindergarten programs (Ontario Department of Education, 1944, 1966) took up a Mode A view of children's play activity as a natural context for children's development. Kindergarten teachers were expected to refrain from intervening in children's play, except to ensure children's safety. Play periods in kindergarten were intended 'to arouse a spontaneous interest in the environment which finds expression in purposeful constructive effort and to develop interest in other children and enjoyment of their company' (Ontario Department of Education, 1944, p. 20) and to have sizeable amounts of 'pupil-directed activity' (Ontario Department of Education, 1966, p. 17).

In the 32 years that elapsed between the development of the second and third kindergarten programs, there was a shift toward closer connections between kindergarten and grade school that required a more outcomes-based kindergarten program (Heydon & Wang, 2006). Around the same time, pressures for more of a technician perspective of play (Mode C) also came from societal demands for accountability in schools and the introduction of province-wide achievement literacy and mathematics tests in grades 3 and 6. Unlike the 1944 program document, which included a daily schedule dividing the kindergarten day into alternating routine and play periods, with each period 'follow

[ing] one another in a natural series so that the child can move easily from one to the next' (Ontario Department of Education, 1944, p. 20), the 1998 document was organized by subject area (e.g. mathematics, literacy, science). A Mode C perspective was taken, as references to play were tied to learning outcomes. Teachers were encouraged, 'to plan productive play activities that have specific learning goals and to provide appropriate and stimulating resources' (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, pp. 6–7). Although the 1998 kindergarten program emphasized teacher-directed activity over play activities in kindergarten classrooms, a report commissioned by the province about the same time (McCain & Mustard, 1999) made a case for a play-based kindergarten program using research showing the contributions of play in young children's brain development. Taking a Mode B perspective, the report's recommendations included that '[l]earning in the early years must be based on quality, developmentally attuned interactions with primary caregivers and opportunities for play-based problem solving with other children that stimulates brain development' (p. 7).

An emphasis on children's cognitive development as an outcome of play continued in a second ministry-commissioned report that informed the development of a kindergarten program for the twenty-first century. *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007), centers on a *Continuum of Development*, is underpinned by cognitive research, and has been used to support the recent move to a play-based kindergarten program for full-day kindergarten. It provides research evidence of the contributions of play to children's brain development and symbolic thinking, to their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development, and to their later literacy and academic success. These types of evidence have been used to counter criticisms of the two substantive changes to kindergarten in the recent past, that is to full-day and to play-based kindergarten. The increase in kindergarten funding for full-day programming, in particular, has led to close public scrutiny and criticism of kindergarten in Ontario (e.g. Boesveld, 2015). This political and societal attention and the substantive additional financial resources allocated to kindergarten may help to explain why the Ontario Ministry of Education has released multiple iterations of the kindergarten program document between 2006 and 2016. Throughout this period, the Ministry consulted widely and supported extensive research from a Mode C approach to play pedagogy to garner support for the changes (e.g. Social Program Evaluation Group, 2012).

Play in the Ontario full-day kindergarten early learning program document

A commitment to creating space for play in kindergarten is evident from the emphasis on play-based learning identified in the preface and carried out through 454 references to play in the current 328-page kindergarten program document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). An emphasis on the adoption of an 'inquiry stance – a mindset of questioning and wondering – alongside the children to support their learning as they exercise their natural curiosity' (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 21) shows a continued influence of Mode A perspectives on the kindergarten program. Harkening back to the 1944 program, one of the six fundamental principles guiding the program, is that 'a natural curiosity and a desire to explore, play, and inquire are the primary drivers of learning among young children' (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 12).

Program goals reflect Mode B perspectives as there is an assertion that kindergarten provides ‘a strong foundation for learning in the early years’ and kindergarten’s role is described as setting ‘children on a path of lifelong learning and nurture competencies that they will need to thrive in the world of today and tomorrow’ (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 8). The word *play* is most commonly used in examples of how children demonstrate their learning in relation to specific expectations and in examples of ways in which their learning might be challenged and extended in terms of the expectations.

However, expectations for children’s knowledge and skill development (what children ‘are expected to know and be able to do’, p. 44) occur within four frames: belonging and contributing; self-regulation and well-being; demonstrating literacy and mathematics behaviors; and problem solving and innovating. These comprise the bulk of the document. The predominance of these expectations, together with the requirement for teachers to link what they observe of children’s learning to ‘success criteria’ (p. 42) reflect more of a technicist Mode C perspective of the role of play in children’s learning. While a range of perspectives of play suggest Modes A and B are evident in the present document, views of pedagogy reflect a Mode C approach, as teachers are to focus narrowly on the children’s demonstrations of success criteria rather than be open to the wide range of learning that children demonstrate in their play.

Conclusion

Curriculum policy development and implementation are complex and problematic. The history of ECE curriculum development has been tied to increasing recognition of the importance of providing children with optimum health, welfare and education provisions, alongside economic policies that enable children’s later school success alongside adult workforce participation. This article has presented a text analysis of the word *play* to identify the ways play is represented in curricular documents in Brazil, New Zealand, and Ontario, and analysed this in terms of Wood’s (2014) three modes of play: Mode A – child-initiated, Mode B – adult guided, and Mode C – technicist educational play. Alongside psychological research there has been a growing research base about the benefits of play for children’s learning and longer-term outcomes. Contemporary theories encourage adults to engage in Mode B-type productive learning relationships and interactions that respect children’s learning intentions and agendas. This research and theory appears to have largely been ignored in favor of research emphasizing brain/cognitive development as countries have developed new iterations of ECE curricular documents that move towards Mode C.

The role and use of play as pedagogy within, or in interpretations of curriculum, occur differently in different cultural contexts. We have identified shifts over time in curriculum and pedagogical practices in our different three historical, economic and cultural contexts. There are some similarities in the way play is being framed within these curriculum policy frameworks but also changes occurring as countries revise these. Elements of Wood’s (2014) three modes are able to be located, but shifts over time appear to struggle to continue to prioritize child-initiated play (mode A) and balance this with adult-initiated play (mode B). In particular, there may be drifts towards mode C as governments take account of selected neuroscience and effectiveness research that suggest academic programs or early intervention are needed to give children a cognitive head start (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, 2015; Sylva et al., 2010). We have argued that there is substantial

international evidence that pedagogy responsive to Mode B's exploratory and educative perspectives of play is more likely than the technician Mode C approaches to enhance young children's motivation to learn, and the social, emotional and cognitive foundations for children's later learning and life outcomes (e.g. Hedges & Cullen, 2012; Pramling-Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2009; Roskos & Christie, 2009; van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Wood, 2013). Attention to this research is needed in order for ECE curricula to be or become responsive to, and advocate for, research based understandings of ways children learn, and the role of play in this learning. It is important to resist the pull toward technician views of play and didactic pedagogies, as these have not played out in longitudinal research as a good return on investment (Marcon, 2002; Montie et al., 2006).

In summary, we have expressed concern that policymakers are often captured by, and respond to, political and societal pressures and selective research evidence. We argue that governments ought to listen more to the research from the sector itself which is multidisciplinary and has identified wider long-term benefits from curricula that emphasize play in modes A and B. We advocate resisting any pressure to move to Mode C, a move that narrows the possibilities for achieving the goals of creating competent and productive citizens, shared by the three jurisdictions highlighted in this article. Instead of paying attention to one-dimensional research findings or the academic outcomes of older children and assuming increased achievement comes from earlier didactic input, we recommend that governments draw on the large body of research showing the positive long-term outcomes of play-based curriculum that reflects a Mode B framing of adults' involvement. Above all, it is important that play remains central to ECE provision and the opportunities it affords protected in policy documents.

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