

(Re)Imagining Play in Early Childhood & Care as Playful Praxis

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The Value of Play

Play is a fundamental human activity and an innate mechanism for children aged birth to 5, essential for their holistic development, including emotional, social, intellectual, linguistic, and physical growth (NAEYC, 2020).

The first years of a child's life are critical for establishing a healthy foundation, with implications for interconnected cognitive, emotional, and social abilities that have early beginnings.

Play is nature's way of helping young children learn, grow and develop a strong foundation for future learning and active participation in society (Dewey, 1938).

Question: Given the scientific consensus on play's value for brain development from birth, how can the state invest in universal, high-quality, play-based care models for children aged birth to age 5?

Overcoming the Play vs. Work Dichotomy

Research shows a "middle ground" where play and work merge, making learning both fun and meaningful for children and adults (NAEYC, 2020).

Supporting Research: Effective, developmentally-appropriate practice involves a mix of instructional strategies, moving away from the dichotomy of purely play-based versus academic instruction. The pedagogy of play identifies three key components for effective engagement: choice, wonder, and delight. For learning to be achievable and stretch experiences for each child, educators must use a continuum ranging from child-initiated self-directed play to guided play.

Question: How do we educate parents and policymakers that play is not "wasting time" but rigorous learning?

(Re)Imagining the Playful Teaching

More intentional teaching is needed in higher education that empowers teacher candidates to effectively use play pedagogy to teach diverse learners. The goal is to prepare culturally responsible and sensitive teachers who have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for teaching diverse learners (Alanís et al, 2021; Cortez-Castro, 2025, 2026; Nieto, 2019).

When preservice teachers engage in play, they re-experience its social, emotional, physical, and cognitive benefits, enabling them to better understand and value play's role in a child's learning.

Supporting Research: In my research, my goal is to facilitate experiences that provoke critical thinking, social justice, and more “conscious thinking” to consider educational implications from the start of a future educator's journey (Cortez-Castro, 2025; 2026).

Question: How can we ensure our state standards explicitly value the "playful teacher" as a professional competency?

Play as a Fundamental Right for All Children

Access to play is a right that must be protected, particularly in border zones and underserved communities (Cortez-Castro, 2025; 2026). This right is asserted in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which confirms that play is fundamental to development.

Supporting Research: Play is defined as behavior or activity initiated, controlled, and structured by children themselves; it is non-compulsory and driven by intrinsic motivation. For children living in poverty or inadequate housing, or those with limited access to safe spaces, the right to play is often curtailed, which can widen existing inequalities.

Question: What policy barriers currently prevent children in high-poverty areas from accessing quality play-based environments?

Playful Andragogy for Teacher Development

Adult learners (preservice teachers) learn best when play is integrated into their own educational experiences, moving beyond didactic methods. I call this approach "Critical Play/Playful Andragogy" (CPPA).

Supporting Research: CPPA is centered on the co-construction of knowledge and uses a playful mindset to explore challenging topics like race and inequality within a safe space for questioning and reflection. The practice of integrating playful activities has been shown to shift preservice teachers' mindsets toward greater playfulness.

Question: How can we incentivize teacher preparation programs to adopt more playful andragogy methods in their curricula?

Children's Play Day at the Zoo: A *Playful Praxis*.)



Community Engagement & "Play Days"

Community-wide events, such as Play Days, advocate for the right to play and engage families in early childhood education and multicultural learning opportunities.

Supporting Research: These community projects are valuable "educative" andragogical experiences that afford limitless opportunities to help students learn and grow into active participants in the community. These service-learning projects require pre-service teachers to engage in research, collaboration, critical thinking, active teaching application experiences and teamwork.

Question: Can the state provide grants for local communities to host large-scale play advocacy events?

Conclusion & Quality Recommendations

Quality in early childhood & care is achieved when teachers are empowered and supported to be spontaneous, creative, reflective, and playful.

Supporting Research: The Intentional Playful Teacher re-examines their beliefs, applies the three Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) Core considerations, creates equitable play spaces, and teaches social and emotional skills intentionally (Cortez-Castro, 2015; NAEYC, 2020). DAP requires differentiating instruction, incorporating play as a core teaching practice, and supporting the development of executive function skills (NAEYC, 2020).

Question: What is the single most important policy shift that the Task Force can make to support playful teaching in Texas?

Thank you!

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