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To cite this article: Eleni Loizou (2017) Towards play pedagogy: supporting teacher play practices with a teacher guide about socio-dramatic and imaginative play, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 25:5, 784-795, DOI: [10.1080/1350293X.2017.1356574](https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2017.1356574)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2017.1356574>



Published online: 03 Aug 2017.



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Towards play pedagogy: supporting teacher play practices with a teacher guide about socio-dramatic and imaginative play

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the work of Vygotsky on scaffolding play and research on teacher intervention and mature forms of play, we have developed a teacher guide about play which frames children's role and scenario development and provides a teacher play intervention schema. The research question explored in this study is 'How does a teacher guide, focusing on socio-dramatic and imaginative play, shape in-service and pre-service teachers' play practices?' Data are collected through planning documents, journal reflections and videos. Findings suggest that the specific guide was employed in a threefold way by the teachers: to reflect on their involvement in children's play; to document children's learning and development, focusing on role and scenario development abilities; and to plan curricula changes and play activities. This study confirms that teachers need explicit pedagogical support to begin to develop sophisticated epistemology on play and implement play pedagogy.

KEYWORDS

Teacher guide; play pedagogy; teacher involvement; socio-dramatic and imaginative play; role and scenario development

Introduction

Play is a form of communication through which children find ways to have fun, communicate their knowledge about the world, refine their skills and exhibit their needs. On another tenet, play can be a means of organizing learning where teachers organize the space and materials, and provide the context in which children play, and thus develop and learn. I advocate for enriched teacher involvement in children's play rather than just setting up the environment. In order to support teachers in this endeavor we need to reflect on our teacher education programs, professional development programs, educational materials and so forth. The aim of this study is to explore how the use of a teacher guide, about socio-dramatic and imaginative play, shaped teachers' play practices.

Mature forms of play

Play has been widely associated with the pedagogy and curriculum of early childhood (EC) education (Bredenkamp and Copple 2009) and specific perspectives are taken for granted: that play is natural, it is the work of children, it enhances development and learning, it is

beneficial to all children and it is children's right (Grieshaber and Mcardle 2011). All of these assume that all children can play; a position which can be challenged, especially if we are to take into account the maturity of play and the level of potential learning affordances.

Drawing on the work of Vygotsky, multiple researchers highlight the importance of play as a social context that creates the Zone of Proximal Development. More specifically, researchers who agree with the socio-cultural understanding of play highlight Vygotsky's statement on how children, when involved in play activity, are a head taller than themselves (Vygotsky [1966] 1977). Nevertheless, Bredikyte and Hakkarainen state that play promotes development 'only if the child moves from elementary to mature forms of joint play' (2011, 60). Moreover, Leong and Bodrova (2012), embracing the work of Vygotsky ([1966] 1977) and Elkonin (2005b), affirm that pretend play development reaches its peak during the EC years; however, they stress the fact that mature forms of play take time, and age does not necessarily guarantee its accomplishment.

Moreover, Leong and Bodrova pinpoint the necessary skills in developing mature forms of play and endorse the work of Elkonin (2005b), pointing out the details of "mature" or "fully developed" play' (2011, 64). Particularly, they elaborate on the four levels of play as identified by Elkonin (as cited in Leong and Bodrova 2011): children play with objects with no specific role in mind but rather their actions determine the role; children play with objects reflecting real-life behavior according to the role they choose to enact; children label the role, act according to it and begin to relate to the other players; and children enact the role chosen based on the scenario taking place and the other players' roles and actions. Researchers have begun to bring attention to the fact that children's pretend play is not as complex or developed as it used to be in the past years (Johnson, Christie, and Wardle 2005). The reasons for this can be multiple; however, Kaprov (2006) pinpoints the main reason being reduced involvement of adults in children's play.

Teacher intervention in play

Adult-child interaction during play can be multifaceted and teachers endorse diverse roles during children's play. Specifically, Andrews (2012) unfolded the different play practices within the EC field and made reference to a play continuum; identifying the level and depth of teacher involvement. Multiple studies underline the different roles and types of involvement teachers perform to support children's play. For example, Jones and Reynolds (2011) refer to the teacher as observer, stage manager, facilitator, participant and so forth; Hadley (2002) suggests that teacher involvement should consider the outside and inside flow of children's play; and Hakkarainen et al. (2013) propose a set of steps of intervention such as observing to understand the play idea, stepping into the play, developing joint play and reaching togetherness.

As discussed earlier, the work of Leong and Bodrova focuses on promoting mature forms of play by developing the 'Tools of the Mind' curriculum, which illustrates strategies teachers can employ to support children's play. Specifically, it is suggested that adults need to scaffold play by: modeling the symbolic use of objects; supporting consistent and extended play scenarios; promoting the enactment of a role for an extended period of time; and endorsing rule consistency of the characters-scenario (Leong and Bodrova 2011). In addition, the work of Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot (2011) provides a model of adult-child play interactions;

exploring the fit between child's needs and teacher guidance ('poor fit' or 'good fit') and how it can lead to independent play. In particular, Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot (2011) clarify levels of teacher guidance in play, these being direct, indirect, observation and no interaction; and provide details of the behaviors that teachers exhibit during these levels of guidance (e.g. suggesting play options).

Teacher preparation for intervention in play

Teacher education programs and pedagogical courses on EC education have always promoted play as an important way in which young children learn and a significant teaching method. Play-based curricula and playful activities are common discourse among EC pre-service teachers (PSTs) (Ryan and Northey-Berg 2014). Wood and Bennett (1997) refer to the gap between the rhetoric and reality of play for in-service teachers (ISTs). Even though teachers are involved in discussing the potential benefits of play, play-based curricula, play and playful activities, they are mainly trained to organize the space and provide the materials for children to play. Their personal involvement is often neglected because there is limited preparation of PSTs in developing and implementing play pedagogy. Ryan and Northey-Berg, discussing the professional preparation of EC teachers, observe that 'teachers are not receiving a lot of support to develop a play pedagogy' (2014, 209) and suggest the need for a 'play pedagogical toolkit' (2014, 205) in order to support them in unfolding the theoretical and practical perspectives of play.

For this reason, the aim of this study was to respond to the following research question:

- (1) How does a teacher guide, about socio-dramatic and imaginative play, shape in-service and pre-service teachers' play practices?

Method

Teacher guide

A teacher guide about play was developed by Loizou (2016) after multiple focused observations over a period of six months in preschool and kindergarten classrooms along with the necessary literature review (Leong and Bodrova 2012; Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot 2011) that examined similar information. The observations involved the examination of children's play skills during socio-dramatic and imaginative play and also the ways teachers intervened in children's play.

The specific guide has three sections: the first includes a list of play characteristics and a definition for six types of play (e.g. socio-dramatic, imaginative, constructive and creative); the second part refers to the children's play skills during role and scenario development. Specifically, there is a list of 11 and 15 play actions that show a progressive maturity of performance in reference to role and scenario development respectively, during socio-dramatic and imaginative play (see Table 1).

The third part of the guide is partly based on the work of Trawick-Smith and Dziurgot (2011) and refers to the teacher involvement in children's play; referring to teacher observation, direct and indirect involvement in children's socio-dramatic and imaginative play focusing on role and scenario development. Teacher direct and indirect involvement is

Table 1. Examples of children's role and scenario actions during play.

Child's actions during role development	Child's actions during scenario development
• Uses materials (e.g. plays with a baby doll) and in this way she is led to taking on a role (e.g. a mother) • Pretends that she has taken a role without stating it and uses the relevant materials (e.g. takes a doll and feeds her so she has the role of the mother) • Says and does things that are connected to the role given to her before or during play, for a short period of time, approximately five to seven minutes (e.g. at the doctor's office she has been given the role of the patient. Starts coughing and says 'Ouch my tummy hurts. I want to throw up. Doctor, help me ...')	• Gets involved in play using real materials, taking on roles without scenarios (e.g. using the watering can to take care of flowers) • Gets involved in play taking on a particular role based on the preset scenario (e.g. at the clinic children pretend to be doctor and patient. The doctor needs help to examine the patient so the child takes the role of the nurse) • Suggests or follows stereotypical types of scenarios (e.g. mother–baby scenario as part of the socio-dramatic play)

Table 2. Examples of adult involvement and actions during play.

Direct involvement	Indirect involvement
• Sets the scenario (e.g. 'go to the next kingdom to ...'). Child's play need (CPN): scenario creation, scenario enrichment • Divides roles (e.g. 'you will be the travel agent and you will be the customer'). CPN: role division, collaboration • Says to the children how to behave (in terms of movement and facial expression) based on the role they enact (e.g. 'Since you are a witch your look must be vicious and your voice should be loud and strict ...') • Gives the exact words for specific roles: (e.g. 'Say to her, I am the queen, I do not allow you to talk to me this way'). CPN: appropriate role performance, enrich drama skills	• Suggests play choices that have to do with the roles or the scenario (e.g. 'you could be the doctor who examines the baby') • Restructures the environment in which the children play and offers or suggests materials to enrich the roles and the scenario (e.g. places plastic medical tools at the doctor's office). CPN: scenario, role enrichment • Verbally encourages children to take a role, or use particular materials (e.g. 'Here, take this baby doll'). CPN: role creation, encouragement, self-confidence, thought planning

elaborated through a list of actions that teachers can take in order to enhance children's play, with a detailed example of what the teacher can do or say during play interactions with the children, and with reference to the specific play need of the child (see [Table 2](#)).

Professional development actions

The specific guide was presented at seminars tailored to the needs of each group of teachers attending. Firstly, there was a one-day conference at the university and everyone was invited to the presentation of the content of the guide. During the second part of the one-day conference, the participants attended a workshop which included activities with different creative drama techniques associated with role and scenario development. Secondly, onsite meetings were arranged, to further explore the potential use of the guide. At the university-based school, the teachers and the author had in-depth discussions about the guide and the ways they used it in their daily practices. At the university and during the school experience program, a seminar on play was organized for the PSTs to further elaborate and clarify the expected play actions from the children and themselves.

Educational contexts

The present study involved three different contexts; an EC research laboratory (ECRL), a school experience program at a university and a university-based school:

- Early childhood research laboratory: the research program with the title ‘Socio-dramatic and Imaginative Play: Role and Scenario Skill Development’ took place at the ECRL and aimed at providing opportunities for children to play and develop roles and scenario during free and structured play. Three girls participated in the program: two of whom were four years old and one who was six years old. The researchers were an EC graduate student and an IST. The program lasted eight weeks and the children attended the laboratory once every week, for an hour and a half. During every meeting the children participated in creative drama activities, organized games and then they played freely. The adults employed the guide, to plan for each session focusing on each child’s play skills and needs, and to consider direct or indirect involvement accordingly.
- Early childhood school experience program: EC student-teachers in their four years of study have to take three school experience courses. During the last course, they are expected to be at a school daily for 10 weeks, and among other activities they are expected to plan for play activities. They are also required to respond to a play assignment, which involves a 30-minute videotaping of themselves during free and/or structured play with the children and a reflective piece on their practice. The student-teachers refer to the guide to plan for the play activity, set specific goals and reflect on the actions they employed. Specifically, they are asked to reflect on the following: the type of involvement chosen, the impact on children’s play and how they could act differently (following structured guidelines).
- University-based school: the university-based school serves children from the ages of four months to six years. It has three infant rooms, two preschool rooms and a kindergarten. Each class has two teachers who have a BA in EC education and an MA in education or a relevant field. For this study, the teachers in the preschool and kindergarten classrooms participated and were expected to implement play practices and utilize the guide in any way that helped them. The author arranged a meeting with the principal of the school and the teachers to talk about play, and the content of the guide was further elaborated with specific examples from practice. Three reflection meetings were planned to discuss and reflect on their play practices. During these meetings the teachers also commented on children’s role and scenario play skills and asked specific questions about their involvement during play.

Participants

The participants of this study included 15 undergraduate EC student-teachers, an in-service EC teacher, an EC graduate student and six in-service EC teachers with a master’s degree. Their ages range between 24 and 35 years and they all have a maximum of five years of teaching experience. This was a purposeful sample since all of the participants attended a course on Play: Learning and Development and one on Creative Drama during their undergraduate studies. They also participated in specific workshops developed to highlight the details of the guide and attain creative drama

experiences. Their familiarity with the basic discourse on play (e.g. play types, play characteristics) was important in order to be able to communicate. Moreover, all of the data collection took place in the same city and within the public school system, with the exception of the ECRL which was part of the university.

Data collection

Documents

Three types of documents were used to collect data:

- Curricula planning documents: all of the participants were developing planning documents with specific learning goals for the different play activities they were organizing. At the ECRL, before each meeting the researchers planned the drama techniques and games they would use with the children. The ISTs planned weekly for each learning center and type of play, based on their observations of children's interests. The student-teachers planned for the play activities outlining details on the type of play, learning center, materials to be used and their potential involvement.
- Communication charts: at the university-based school the teachers fill out a communication chart daily focusing on important learning and development accomplishments of each child. Therefore, details and excerpts from children's play, which highlighted play skills, were used as data from the charts.
- Children's development and learning summary, and play profiles: every semester the teachers at the university-based school write a summary for each child highlighting their development and learning. In addition, the researchers at the ECRL developed play profiles for each child where they highlighted the role and scenario skills they developed by the end of the program using specific play excerpts. Therefore, the information that referred to play development was the main source of data for this study.

Videos

All of the participants were involved in videotaping themselves during play with the children. The amount of time varied in the three contexts: the ISTs collected three videos of 30 minutes each, over the course of one semester; the student-teachers collected one video of 30 minutes each in one semester; and the researchers at the laboratory videotaped all eight 90-minute meetings.

Reflective journals

All of the participants kept a reflective journal where they had expressed their thoughts on the development of play activities, children's play skills and their own involvement. The student-teachers were required to include a description of the play activity, their role during the activity and then comment on how they could have acted differently.

Ethics

All of the participants signed a written consent form and ensured that for the children in their videos they received a consent form from their parents. Anyone, adult and/or child,

at any time of the study had the freedom to withdraw from the study or deny the use of their video recordings.

Data analysis

The author with one of her doctoral students worked separately in analyzing the data employing the thematic analysis and the constant comparison method. Themes drawn from the guide (e.g. teacher's type of involvement; direct or indirect, type of play, specific children's play skills; suggesting a new role) along with others which helped unfold the play situation (e.g. type of play, learning center details, learning goals) were employed. The two researchers met to compare and contrast their themes, and to verify the details of each one in order to ensure confirmability. There were limited differences in the themes highlighted by each researcher and those that were different were reviewed by an EC education faculty member. The themes that were common between the two researchers were the ones chosen to be employed with all of the data in all three settings, thus establishing a level of credibility. For example, for the theme of teacher involvement the details as seen in all data sources from the three contexts were as follows: when the teachers employed direct involvement they would all tell the children how to behave according to the role they chose, and when they used indirect involvement they would provide children with suggestions in reference to the different roles they could have.

Findings

The overall data analysis of all three contexts helped unfold the details of each one and highlight the common ways that the guide impacted teachers' play practices. The following section includes three parts that refer to the common actions exhibited by the teachers in employing the guide: reflection; curriculum development; and documentation of learning and development.

Reflection

Data show that all of the participants, pre-service and in-service EC teachers, employed the guide in ways that helped them unfold and assess the way they participated in children's play. Specifically, as the data suggest all of the participants employed both direct and indirect involvement in children's play thus we reflect on both types of involvement.

Direct involvement

Teachers employed direct involvement and specifically the following two behaviors, as described in the guide: says to the children how to behave based on the role they were enacting; and asks questions or gives information to guide or enrich the role and scenario development. A common element employed by all of the teachers, during direct involvement, was to tell children the way they should act depending on the role they choose and the scenario taking place. For example, in the following excerpt the teacher is giving the child all of the details about how witches and princesses are expected to act, talk and walk, because the girls decided to take on those roles:

... The witch, that's me, will be walking tough and angry, look at my face it will be angry, whereas the princesses, that's you, will be walking happily, the fairies will spread your wings and smile. The pirates are strong and walk powerfully, strictly and angrily and spread their arms.

All of the teachers were involved in the process of reflecting on the type of involvement they chose and considered other potential ways to participate in children's play, more appropriate and less intrusive. The following reflection from one of the teachers who participated as a co-player at the learning center of the 'restaurant' is such an example:

Then at the point when we sat to eat, there was too much guidance from me, which could have been reduced. For example, I was telling them to say what they will eat and to develop dialogue between themselves.

Indirect involvement

Data suggest that all of the teacher participants also used indirect involvement and they specifically employed the following actions, as described in the guide: ask knowledge-content questions and use language that does not interrupt the play; and suggest a new solution or clue in the developing scenario. The following example shows a teacher asking knowledge-content questions.

How many guests will you have at your party? Five? How many chairs do we need? Because there are 5 persons. How many plates will you need? Five ... Forks? We don't need forks we are the bad ones ...

Another action that teachers utilized, as suggested in the guide, was the provision of a suggestion for a new situation, event, dilemma or solution in the children's scenario within the role they had taken. The following reflection from one of the teachers shows how she purposefully extended the child's involvement in the scenario by employing the specific type of indirect involvement:

[At the learning center of 'the nutritionist'] As a client I was trying to ask questions in order to elaborate our conversation-dialogue. During this incident, I asked him to write which foods I should eat because a lot of times I eat unhealthy foods.

Likewise, the PSTs employed the specific guide to reflect on their actions, especially after watching their videos and writing their reflective journals. The PSTs and the teachers at the ECRL stated how they scrutinized the guide to consider how they could have acted differently during their interactions with the children and how they could have improved their involvement to enhance children's play.

Teachers' reflections, in general, were related to children's play skills; teachers reflected on how their choice of actions, and thus play involvement, corresponded to the existence or lack of specific play skills:

I had a leading role at the specific scenario and I was actually developing the scenario. I felt that if I left the children wouldn't be able to develop it themselves. I am troubled by the fact that the children do not endure and develop a role they choose.

Depending on the children's play skills, teachers reflected on the type of involvement they could have employed, which would be more constructive for the specific point in the play. So, when the children were having a hard time developing a long-lasting scenario, the

teachers believed that the most effective action would be to participate in children's play for a long period of time. The following reflective quote suggests how a teacher believes that her presence is crucial for a long-lasting scenario:

They [the children] find it difficult to even carry on with the scenario without the presence of the teacher and they can't spend much time on a specific scenario. As a result they become upset.

Curriculum development

By consulting the guide, the teachers became more aware and capable of setting future play skill-oriented goals, and having specific expectations for each child separately and all of them together. In this way they were able to set specific teaching goals in their long-term planning documents. In one of their planning documents, a central goal was to ensure that children learned to collaborate for the development of a scenario. One of the teachers reflects on focusing on a single child:

He needs more support regarding the expressions of his face and the position of his body. When he enacts a role it is obvious that he is in a play mode but it's not always obvious which role he plays.

The teachers' planning documents suggest that one of the main goals that most of them incorporated was for the children to use the appropriate vocabulary according to the role they chose to enact, and the context in which the role was unfolding. In addition, data from teachers' planning show how they plan in ways that determine their role and play involvement. According to one of the teachers' weekly planning documents which focused on the theme of fairy tales, one of the teaching goals set for the imaginative play center 'the pirates' was:

Children should be able to describe the actions of the role they take (e.g. cook) and behave according to the role they are given.

By setting the specific goal the teachers were also enforcing their own behavior which would have to be direct, with specific questions and information sharing.

Documenting children's learning and development

The use of the specific guide supported teachers to have a more scientific understanding of children's play skills and use play discourse. In particular, in preparing children's play profiles teachers documented and analyzed play episodes with reference to the child's development and learning. The following excerpt is part of a child's play profile highlighting her play behavior, area of development and specific skills observed:

The evil witch has lost her magic broom. Julia says 'I have got something perfect, a broom like a sword'. Julia suggests to give the witch a sword to use it as a broom.

Area of Development: Cognitive

Play Skill: Symbolic use of objects

Other Skills: Language-communication, creative thinking.

The teachers purposefully used information, such as dialogs developed between the children when enacting specific roles (e.g. the seller and the buyer), as a means to describe and

pinpoint their language development. So the guide supported them when documenting children's play skills and other areas of development. An example from a child's learning and development summary is the following:

One of the special characteristics of Elena is her intense creativity and her ability to leave her imagination free and to develop dialogues, unfold play roles and scenarios. (Verbal communication – creativity)

The student-teachers were expected to reflect and point out children's learning outcomes during the play activities they planned. In order to do so, they focused on children's play skills, as one of them characteristically comments:

I chose to develop social and emotional skills because, as a result of the observation I conducted during children's free play inside and outside the classroom, I saw that despite the fact that children play in the same place they don't cooperate to develop the same scenario

The specific guide helped the teacher participants in developing a play professional identity and scientific discourse in reference to play.

Discussion and conclusion

There is a dilemma in the literature of whether teachers should be involved in children's play and we need to be vigilant of the potential adult dominance over children's play. Nevertheless, in order to overcome the superficial use of play in terms of playful activities, the short-term and undeveloped play experiences and with regard to supporting teachers to appropriately implement play practices (Loizou and Avgitidou 2014), a teacher guide about play was developed and its input on teacher practice was mapped. Mc Lane eloquently states that we need to 'know enough about play to be both advocates and skeptics ... [and that] to be effective advocates for play, early childhood educators need comprehensive and sophisticated understandings of play, grounded in research as well as practice ...' (2013, 44–45).

The teachers in this study were provided with a specific guide, along with the support to begin to enact play practices in more sophisticated and well thought out ways. Data from the three educational contexts allow us to suggest that such initiatives provide the space where teachers can begin to develop play pedagogy which respects children's play context. The specific guide oriented towards socio-dramatic and imaginative play, focusing on role and scenario development for children's skills and teacher's type of involvement, asserted teachers with the necessary knowledge and authority to develop play pedagogy. Teachers were involved in utilizing the appropriate discourse to reflect on their practice, to develop the necessary curricula changes and activities, and to assess children's learning and development. Data show that teachers in the three different contexts, through the direct and indirect implementation of the guide, began to develop a refined play epistemology; they embarked on focused planning and critical reflection of their play practices. Their actions illustrate how they begun to develop play pedagogy, one which supports them as play educators and supports children towards mature forms of socio-dramatic and imaginative play.

Similarly, other research has explored the potential use of tools for in-service, pre-service, professional development coaches and so forth. For example, Kieff and Wellhousen (2000) explored the use of tool kits with PSTs to develop anti-bias teaching strategies.

Through the implementation of this tool kit, PSTs were able to observe, identify opportunities for implementing such strategies and plan appropriately. Also McNerney, Corcoran Nielsen, and Clay (2006) used a standardized teacher assessment observation tool, the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation, which was focused on literacy practices. The use of the specific tool was considered useful by literacy coaches who employed it for professional development and assisted teachers in self-evaluation, reflection, planning and setting specific goals. Moreover, Gmitrova (2013) had similar outcomes in her research when teachers participated as observers and players in a pedagogical experiment, which involved performing and assessing pretend play fixed sessions with kindergarteners. The use of a specific survey employed to observe and assess child and playing activity ‘exercised a significant influence on the teachers’ pedagogical views and practice’ (Gmitrova 2013, 1717). The teachers explained how, using the specific survey which included specific play indicators (e.g. the children play with a new thing or toy offered by the teacher, children designate themselves a role), they learned to observe, evaluate play and recognize the need to intervene.

Teacher training and professional development programs vary in terms of content knowledge, teaching resources and practice-oriented techniques. Ryan and Northey-Berg affirm that ‘despite decades of research on children’s play, the many forms it takes ... very little is known about what it is that early childhood educators need to be able to know and do to enact a pedagogy of play’ (2014, 211). This study is beginning to provide information about what teachers need to know and do to enact pedagogy of play, focusing on socio-dramatic and imaginative play.

As an EC teacher educator and researcher, I am proposing that in order for teachers to become genuine play pedagogs, they have to know both the theoretical and practical approaches of play. Interpretively, I recommend that a play pedagogical framework for teacher training should consider the following: the variables of each play type (e.g. zooming into scenario and role development for socio-dramatic play); the continuum of children’s play skills (simple and complicated expected actions) that lead towards mature forms of the specific type of play (e.g. explore a non-stereotypical scenario for a long period of time) and then, accordingly, a set of teacher-focused involvement actions (e.g. ask questions in order to elaborate children’s scenario or role) to promote mature forms of play. With the use of a teacher guide, which unfolded the details of this framework, we were able to show how teachers begin to enact play pedagogy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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