



## Children's Play and Teacher's Playful Teaching a Discussion about Play in the Preschool Class

Helena Ackesjö<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Linnæus University, Kalmar, Sweden.

### Author's contribution

*The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

### Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/BJESBS/2017/31653

#### Editor(s):

(1) Doutora Laurinda Leite, Institute of Education, University of Minho, Portugal.

#### Reviewers:

(1) Vassiliki Riga, University of Patras, Greece.

(2) Gokhan Duman, Gazi University, Turkey.

(3) Cagla Gur, Cyprus International University, Cyprus.

Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sciencedomain.org/review-history/18119>

**Original Research Article**

**Received 18<sup>th</sup> January 2017**  
**Accepted 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2017**  
**Published 9<sup>th</sup> March 2017**

### ABSTRACT

In this article, the play used in preschool class education is discussed. On the one hand, research has shown that there seems to be a positional shift towards a more academic and school-preparatory positioning of the preschool class education. On the other hand, this is still a voluntary school form that shall be based on preschool traditions and play. In addition, research has shown that there actually is a weak emphasis on care provision and play in this educational practice. There is also a lack of knowledge about how play is used and conditioned. The purpose for this study is therefore to analyze the play used in preschool class education.

Data for the study is extracted from an 11 months ethnographic case study and the original empirical material consists of 1013 minutes of recorded film in addition to 224 A4-pages of field notes constructed during one year in one preschool class. Examples of common, ordinary and recurring play situations during the school year were selected from this material. Inspired by qualitative content analysis the selected play situations were joined together in three different categories: 1) The optional play, 1) The cultural play, and 3) The educational play.

In line with previous research, the results show that play in preschool classes never is "free". Rather, it is conditioned and framed by the teachers (present or not present); children are committed to play in a certain way and a certain time. In addition, there is a future perspective in the use of play. Playing activities seems often to be closely linked to educational goals.

\*Corresponding author: E-mail: [helena.ackesjo@lnu.se](mailto:helena.ackesjo@lnu.se);

*Keywords: Play; preschool class; educational play; ethnography; preschool tradition.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Sweden, children attend preschool between the ages of 1-5 years old. The year they turn six, they make the transition to the preschool class. At age seven, they enter the first grade in the compulsory school. The preschool class is a voluntary school year for six-year-old children. It is designed to act as a bridge between the preschool and school traditions and cultures, with the purpose to relate to these surrounding institutions – the preschool and the school – in order to 'smoothen' the children's transitions between them. One way to smoothen the transitions between preschool, preschool class and compulsory schooling is for example to use aspects from the preschool tradition such as play and creative activities in the teaching in the preschool class and school. Play and creative activities are important aspects required of the preschool class education as well as for all education during the first years of compulsory schooling: *Creative activities and play are essential components of active learning. In the early years of schooling, play in particular is of great importance in helping pupils to acquire knowledge* [1].

Hence, the preschool class is situated in the borderland, and in a field of tension between preschool and school. Located in between preschool and school, the teachers in the preschool class have to orient themselves in relation to a social pedagogical role and a more academic role in preparing children for school [2]. Very few studies that have focused on the content of preschool class education, and even fewer have focused on the use of play in this pedagogical arena. One study [3] has analysed the educational position of the preschool class on the basis of the way in which the teachers present the goals associated with their teaching, how this teaching is organised and motivated, and the values on which their activities are based. This was made through an examination of the teachers' own descriptions in the weekly reports that the teachers send home to the parents each week. On a general level, the weekly reports indicated a powerful orientation towards an academic position for the preschool class, with a school-oriented focus and subject-related knowledge. Concepts and terms drawn from the teaching in compulsory school were used in a number of the weekly reports, concepts such as *assessments, homework, individualised*

*teaching and goals.* The use of these and similar concepts provides additional support for the thesis of a positional shift towards a more academic and school-preparatory positioning of the preschool class. In addition, there was a very weak emphasis on care provision and play in the weekly reports, since these were described only very rarely. This movement seems to be a global trend, and Persson [4] relates it to the globalised knowledge economy. Within this movement, the education for the youngest children should be viewed as an investment to prepare them for school and an increasingly competitive educational situation. In addition, research by Simeonsdotter Svensson [5] and Karlsson et al. [6] has described the preschool class as a "schoolified" school form and argues that the preschool class may in many ways be viewed as constituting an 'additional school year'. The results from these study mentioned above are interesting when it comes to the education in a voluntary school form such as the preschool class, which is assigned to unite the preschool and compulsory school educational traditions, and where play and creative activities shall be used as a basis for learning [1].

The picture of the preschool class as being characterized by "schoolification" is however not unequivocal. The evaluation of the preschool class education at a national level, done by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate [7], presents a different picture. Their report shows that the preschool class education contains powerful elements from the preschool tradition. The report also showed that so-called "free play" activities were given a great deal of room in the inspected preschool classes. This picture is in line with research by Garpelin et al. [8] and Ackesjö [9] that states that teachers in the preschool class appear to a large extent both to relate to and to desire to preserve and safeguard the preschool tradition and its history. These studies argue that the preschool tradition, involving "free play", is firmly rooted in the activities of the preschool class.

### 1.1 The Aim of this Study

The differences across the cited research highlight the purpose with this study. On the one hand, there seems to be a positional shift towards a more academic and school-preparatory "schoolified" positioning of the education in the preschool class. On the other

hand, this is still a voluntary school form that shall be based on preschool traditions and play. However, little is known about the content of the preschool class education. Furthermore, there is a lack of knowledge about how play, which shall be the base of the education, is used. The purpose with this study is therefore to illuminate and discuss play in the preschool class education. The questions this article aims to answer are *How is play used and conditioned in the preschool class education?* and *How can the play used be described?*

## 2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ABOUT PLAY IN AN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Several researchers have studied children's play in an educational context from different perspectives and its importance for children's development and learning. In this following section, a brief summary of this extensive amount of research will be presented.

### 2.1 The Power of Play

Research often focuses on the benefits of play, which according to Øksnes [10,11] undermines the intrinsic values of play. Øksnes emphasises that children need to play shows how play is conducted "in between" or in the cracks of institutional life. She discusses children's abilities to play as important, in addition to the descriptions of playing as possibilities to escape adult orders. From this perspective, Øksnes describes play as "special activities in a world of non-play" [12]. In line with this reasoning, research by Russell [13] implies that play can be understood as disturbing the ordering.

For Sutton-Smith [14], play appears to be a basic irrational phenomenon and an example of where chaos, unpredictability and resistance coexist. Playing is, on the basis of this definition, an irrational phenomenon that cannot be controlled; children's play is not something that adults can interfere and plan. Play holds a unique power in itself.

However, there is also power present in children's play. Ihrskog [15] describes how play has a built-in rejection mechanism. Children sometimes show a need to manifest power and mark exclusion in play, regardless of the children's age. This also offers opportunities to discuss the role of "free play" in the educational context, which is a term, according to research by Haglund [16], often used in Nordic school

contexts. Haglund defines the term in an after-school care context by describing how this kind of play is "organized by pupils, governed by their interests and supported by the staff" [16]. However, research [17] has also shown that children in large groups (as in a school context) need more than support from adults – they need adults present in their play and they appreciate when the activities in the after-school care are organised and managed by teachers and when the teachers participate.

One can also discuss the amount of freedom in "free play". Studies from the after-school care show that what children are allowed to play always is determined by the teachers. Perceptions of "good practice" frame what play activities are made possible in the practice - and for whom they are made possible [18]. This reasoning is supported by research by Tullgren [19] from the preschool context which shows how play is controlled by teachers, other children, and by time and place. In this way, children are shaped and committed to play in a certain way, in a certain place and at a certain time.

It is often assumed that children learn while they play [20]. But what do they learn, and how?

There is a future perspective closely tied to play in an educational context. In this perspective, teachers want to use, monitor and control children's play. The aim is to guide children toward a given play culture that is considered 'good' for children, and where play contributes to any form of learning and development [21]. This perspective is related to a contemporary educational climate that focuses on tests, results and assessments. In light of this reasoning, it nowadays seems to become 'necessary' for teachers to connect the play in an educational context to any form of learning and development [21]. In addition, Hattie [22] has described that children's joint play can contribute to a sense of a positive spirit in the classroom. These positive influences can be an important factor in student achievement in the classroom.

One could also discuss Johnson, Christie and Wardle's [23] concept educational play. However, this is also a controversial and paradoxical concept. According to these researchers, play is a self-initiated process with open ends, where the process is more important than the product. Education on the other hand has a focus on the end - the end of the term, the end of the book - as well as on products (results) rather than processes. However, Johnson,

Christie and Wardle [23] state that there are benefits to be gained if we link educational goals to play. Play provides two vital functions in children's achievement of educational goals – learning strategies such as problem-solving, creative thinking and positive self-esteem, and play as a vehicle to learn other and more specific skills (such as using different games in specific subject education). In general, they state, the greatest advantage to using play in education is that it enables teachers to teach about specific goals in a way that from a child's perspective may be self-motivating. Learning through play can make learning meaningful, and if play can motivate children to learn, it is an excellent method for all teaching.

### 3. THEORIES OF PLAY

The concept of play is used worldwide in many different settings and with many different functions. There is a large amount of research on play, but no universal consensus or specific definition of the term. This means that play is a multifaceted phenomenon, which involves specific aspects and dimensions for the players - aspects that are not always visible to the observer [23].

Even if the essence of play is difficult to define, it is not so difficult to recognize. Whether a child, or an adult, is playing depends on the inner experience. When we are playing, we enter a state of mind that gives us freedom to deal with reality. Play permits us to stay in the present moment, to forget the past and not to be concerned about the future. In this respect, play is almost always enjoyable and pleasant since it involves mentally stepping away from pressures, such as meeting social expectations. Since play is a way to disconnect from the real world, the player can worry less about social evaluation [23].

According to the early work of Huizinga [24], the essence of play is fun. The outcome of play is not clear, which adds an aspect of uncertainty to it. Play is not for real; it is distinct from reality both in time and place. In his later work, Huizinga [25] states that play is a form of existence. The human is a playing being. Huizinga states that the desire to play is central to human nature; it is a characteristic of our being. He describes play as a voluntary process that takes place within limited time and space. Play follows common

rules. Play is its own purpose, and it creates a sense of excitement and joy and an experience of something other than ordinary life.

Play can also be understood as a cultural phenomenon and playing as a social construction [24]. Play must be understood in relation to the culture in which the children are social actors. This leads us to a social aspect of play. Corsaro [26] states that children who find each other in play activities tend to create peer cultures. A peer culture is defined as a set of activities, routines, artefacts, values and interests that is produced, reproduced and shared with peers. A peer culture often stands apart from other children, but also from adults. Children try to control and shelter their peer culture by finding places and spaces where they can be at peace. This implies a socio-cultural perspective of play.

Sutton-Smith [14] identifies seven attributes of play as part of his attempt to find out what other play theorists have in common when defining play. His conclusion is that play can serve as a way to nurture flexibility and variability in all those who play (regardless of age) to ensure adaption to a changing world. According to this reasoning, he contends that play in an educational context – such as in the preschool class – can be understood as progress, which emphasizes that children can learn something useful from play. In line with this, Pellegrini [27] also argues that play is positive for learning for the present here and now, but also for learning for adult life.

However, the connection between play and learning has also been theoretically questioned. For example, Sutton-Smith [28] argues in his later work that there is really no evidence that children learn something at all while they play. It seems likely, he contends, but there is no evidence. In addition, Caillois [29] presents a more provocative perspective of play. He considers play as an occasion of waste of time, waste of skill and waste of energy. According to Caillois, play is free (not mandatory), separate (limited in space and time), uncertain, unproductive, rule-governed and make-believe (not for real).

These presented theories of play will be used as an analytic springboard in this study, as my ambition is to describe how play is used and conditioned in the preschool class and how the play used in this specific pedagogical context can be described.

#### 4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data for this study is extracted from a larger ethnographic case study [30,31] conducted during 11 months. The original data consists of 1013 minutes of recorded film in addition to 224 A4-pages of field notes from most of the activities in one preschool class during one school year, from August to June [2].

Inspired by the qualitative content analysis method [32] the situations described in this article were extracted from the extended empirical material. A content analysis can give us further information about the social context and aspects stressed or ignored. The method includes reading, making selections and judgements and constructing categories [30]. The selection of examples to be analysed is a process that needs to be handled carefully. Too large units risk to contain too much information and more than one phenomenon. Too small units risk fragmenting the empirical material [32]. Therefore, the selection of empirical examples and the analysis involved several steps:

*First*, the film material and field notes were studied in order to get an overall sense about play in the preschool class.

*Second*, the quest was to find situations where children were given the opportunity to play during the school day. Examples of situations where children were playing that could be considered common, ordinary and recurring during the whole school year were extracted for further analysis.

*Third*, an analysis inspired by the qualitative content analysis method was made in order to illuminate the content in play in preschool class and to show the diversity [33]. In this process, the selected empirical situations were joined together in three different categories based on its diversity: 1) The optional play, 1) The cultural play, and 3) The educational play. Making these categories is a critical moment, since the categories should be complete as well as exclusive. Therefore, the analyzing process implies choosing meaningful content to illustrate and illuminate the categories.

*Forth*, the categories were theoretically analyzed. Questions that guided me in the analysis process were: *What do the children play? When do children play? What conditions surround the play? How can these*

*play situations be described theoretically? How do the teachers support the children's play?* During this process, the empirical examples in each category were subjected to a systematic and theoretical reflection to be able to identify underlying patterns, in order to answer the research questions set up for this study. A table was constructed in order to summarize and illuminate the results.

*Fifth*, theory and empirical data was intertwined, to illuminate the play situations using theories and simultaneously discuss the theories using empirical play situations. This became a back-and-forth movement and is also shown in the following results section, where the empirical situations and the theoretical discussions becomes intertwined.

#### 5. RESULTS

In this section, the three categories of recurring situations where play becomes part of the everyday educational context in this preschool class will be presented. After the presentation of each category, a theoretical discussion follows.

##### 5.1 The Optional Play

Optional play is common in many preschool classes, and is offered in many different forms [7]. Teachers often safeguard and protect this form of play, since it is an important part of the preschool tradition [9,8]. In the following section, I present two aspects of optional play. The first aspect is play as "a filler" between other (more important) activities, which is shown in the following example:

According to the schedule posted on the whiteboard in the classroom, longer periods of optional play activities occur daily. For example, children are always offered optional play after the circle time that starts each day.

This actual day, the children and teachers talk about the day's date, month and year, and today's weather during circle time. After this, the children get to watch a movie about the alphabet. After the film, the teachers tell the children that it is time for freely chosen play activities. Some children gather around the drawing table and other children in the

building corner. A few of them discover a new pool table in one of the rooms, and start playing. One of the boys wanders around for a long time between the drawing table, the building corner and the pool table. He seems to have difficulty choosing an activity, and finally he seems to walk aimlessly around the premises. After an extended period of play time, the teachers call the children together with a small brass bell. Soon all are gathered on the sofa in front of the whiteboard. It is now time to return to work with the letter of the week.

and hands out the last assignment. One by one, the children finish the task and leave the room to go and play.

### **5.1.1 Theoretical discussion**

These examples above illuminate different ways to make use of and frame the optional play. In the first two examples, play is presented as a filler. This play takes place as “a less important” activity in the gap between the more important tasks (the teaching). In the last two examples, play is used as a motivation, and perhaps also as a reward and/or as a way to burn off energy. In all these examples, the play becomes subordinated to the other educational activities in the classroom, and disconnected from the learning and teaching. This is summarized in Table 1.

The second aspect presented is optional play as motivation/reward after work done correctly, which is shown in the following two examples:

The teacher presents various letters and words on the whiteboard. The children sit quietly at the tables and work with their assignments. The teacher suddenly says, “*When you are done, you can play!*” This seems to motivate the children to work faster. One by one, they finish their tasks and leave the classroom. They go in different directions to play in the smaller rooms connected to the classroom. The teacher starts to gather his material and finishes up the lesson.

What unites these examples is that play appears to be “something else” other than educational instruction, something in between another work in progress. This is what Øksnes [10,11] calls cracks in the institutional life. The teachers are absent in this form of play, but this does not mean that the play is not conditioned by the adults. In fact, it is controlled by the teachers as they decide when the play starts, when it ends and where it should take place.

The children work with practical math. They receive different assignments by the teacher to be solved individually or in groups. To encourage the children to complete the final assignment, the teacher says: “*This is the final task! And I’m not sure that you will manage ... It is quite difficult...*” The children get curious and immediately want to know more. “*When you have completed the task, you are allowed to go and play!*” This way the teacher has all the children’s attention

Children are given control in this form of play - but within certain limits [20,19]. In the first example, we can also see that this kind of play does not suit all children. One of the children shows difficulty in starting to play at all. Instead he wanders around during the entire playtime, seemingly idle. Here the teachers do not provide any support, neither in selecting an activity nor in inviting him to become part of a group of children already playing.

**Table 1. The optional play**

<b>Text</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Theoretical explanations</b>	<b>Category</b>
Children’s play	Children’s play as a filler, as a motivation and/or as a reward for job well done.	The essence of play [24,25]	Optional play
	Play as “something else”, separated from learning and teaching.	Play as a waste of time [29]	

Theoretically, this form of play can be described in different ways. Huizinga [24,25] would describe this as play in its purest form, as a way of being, a form of existence, where the essence is to have fun. Speaking with Caillios' [29] words, this form of play is a waste of time, as play becomes separated from learning, limited in space and time (children are not allowed to play outside, only in the classrooms) and fairly unproductive and disconnected from the education. This disconnection is also shown in the teacher's absence in the play situations described. However, Johnson, Christie and Wardle [23] state that this form of play can foster creativity. In the examples above, the play becomes enjoyable and pleasant (at least for most of the children) since it involves mentally stepping away from educational pressures for a while. Hence, the gains with optional in this form is relaxation.

## 5.2 The Cultural Play

From time to time, different commercial cultures come into the life of school. Such examples of this are ice hockey collection cards - or as more recent, Pokémon. These cultures also affect children's play, and teachers can take advantage of and use them in different ways, as in the following situation:

The boys in this preschool class start to bring their Beyblades (a plastic toy that spins) to school. When the teachers give the children a moment for optional play, these children start tournaments. This tournament involves children playing against each other in pairs, until one child has knocked out all of his opponents and stands alone as the winner. Over time, more and more of the boys join the group either in the audience or as participants in the various race heats. To participate, you have to have your own Beyblade, which is a toy that can cost a lot of money.

The play with the Beyblades goes on for several weeks. It becomes clear that rules, standards and conditions are being negotiated within this culture. However, these negotiations are not always visible or obvious to adults. Anyone can take part, but one needs to have a Beyblade (one's own or borrowed). The toy thus becomes a cultural artefact that frames this play, but that also construct exclusion. It is observed by the teachers that the tournaments now and then

seem to have more spectators than players, which may be because most children do not have their own Beyblades and therefore cannot participate.

This day one of the teachers comes out into the corridor and says:

- *Come to the kitchen if you want to make your own Beyblade!*
- *Yeah! My own??* say a few of the children and move directly towards the kitchen. *But how can I...?* is the next immediate question from the children. The teacher explains that they can put wooden sticks in small wooden wheels and then paint the wheels in different colors to create patterns as they spin. With great intensity, almost all the boys (no girls) begin to make their own toy, discuss what sort of Beyblade they want to make and what different features they should have. They paint and glue as they discuss and compare different approaches to how they could get their Beyblades to spin quickly, and which patterns are cool. They try them on the floor and go back to the table to adjust and tweak them a little more. They experiment with colors and materials.

One of the boys, who always brings one or more "real" Beyblades from home to school, is suspicious toward this activity. At first he would not participate in the making of the wooden toys, but later on he joins the group and makes his own anyway. He comments repeatedly how the real Beyblades look, and that the real ones are not made of wood. He seems hesitant about this whole project. After a while he leaves the group, places his wooden toy on the shelf and takes a book instead. He sits down to read. As the other children are about to try their new wooden toys on the floor in the classroom, the teacher collects them and says, *Let's race!*

All the children gather in the kitchen. The teacher initiates a tournament with all the wooden toys in a large plastic box on the table. They count points. They discuss colors and patterns as they spin. The children choose and switch between their various toys. Most of the children participate with great enthusiasm and interest, both in the race and by standing on the sidelines and cheering.

### **5.2.1 Theoretical discussion**

One could say that the difference between *play* and *game* becomes visible in this example. According to the early work of Huizinga [24], the essence of play is fun. When it comes to play, the outcome is not clear, which adds an aspect of uncertainty to it. Huizinga also states that play is not for real; it is distinct from reality both in time and place. However, within this described situation above, the outcome is very clear. The goal is to win the tournament. This makes it more of a game than play.

This example of play can be understood as a cultural phenomenon and the playing as a social construction [24]. From a socio-cultural perspective, play creates a peer culture among children [26] which is based on a set of activities, routines, artefacts, values and interests that are produced, reproduced and shared with peers. The children also protect their culture by taking control over it. One way to do this is to move it to the corridor outside the classroom where they can be at peace from the other children and adults. This is summarized in Table 2.

The play, and this culture, described above also has a built-in manifest of power and exclusion. The Beyblades the children play with are very expensive, and some of the children have none, meaning that they are excluded from this culture. With the production of their own wooden toys, all children can participate. Suddenly, all the children were invited in the culture and to interact within it. While they make their own toys, they also negotiate a new framework and culture; how to play, where to play, how the tournaments will proceed and how the toy has to be built to work properly or to be cool. By entering the culture in this way, the teacher has the opportunity to level out the social differences in the children's group. Now all children can participate on equal terms. Anyone who makes a wooden toy will be invited in the game - and by this, a new culture is created. In addition, the teacher is present and participating in the tournament. This joint play can contribute to a sense of positive spirit in the pedagogical practice.

But – what happened to children's original culture? When the teacher stepped in, he also took control and power over the culture. The children's own play and peer culture became a teacher-controlled activity, and the teacher made it a part of the pedagogical practice. Most likely,

the teacher wanted to meet expectations by leveling out the exclusivity and differences within the group. This can be part of the perceptions of "good teacher practice". However, this initiative also framed the new playing practice and erased the children's own culture.

### **5.3 The Educational Play**

Many preschool class teachers use play in their teaching [9,8,7]. These following situations describe such play-based teaching activities, of which there are common variations in this specific preschool class. This first example shows a situation where the teaching subject is mathematics, the whole and the parts of a number:

This day the class is going to do some mathematic bowling. The teacher builds a bowling alley in the classroom. The children's assignment is to, one by one, knock down six pins (PET-bottles) with a tennis ball. They will report their results by presenting about how many bottles they knocked down and how many bottles remained standing. Thus, the aim is to train the whole and the parts of the number six. The teacher is making a large table with all the children's results on the whiteboard. When not playing, the children are a supportive audience. When all the children have got to bowl once, the play is finished. The children are told that they will continue to work with the results using different statistical exercises another day.

This second example shows a situation where the subject still is mathematics, but in addition also concerns problem-solving and different shapes:

The teacher begins by gathering the children around the table in a smaller room beside the classroom.

- *Now you are divided into two teams, the teacher says. The problem is that I've been a little careless. I have accidentally confused my Lego pieces, he says and takes out a box of Lego pieces and places it on the table. So I would really appreciate some help from you, to get some order in this Lego box. The teacher pours out a pile of Lego to each group of children.*



The children begin to study what is in these piles of Lego. Most of them seem to immediately begin to think about how the material can be sorted. The teacher continues:

- *Now, he repeats, I need your help to sort my pieces.*
- *White should be with white!* a child shouts, who is already underway to figure out a solution on how the material can be sorted.

Immediately a discussion among the children begins between the different teams about how to sort the Lego pieces. Both groups agree that they will sort by color, regardless of what pieces there are. Children begin to negotiate with each other about where to put the different piles of Lego and which piece goes into which pile.

- *Once you are done sorting them, I want you to tell me how you were thinking,* the teacher says.

The work is very intensive in both groups, and the teacher sits down at the table to study the children working. The children are constantly discussing about where to place the pieces. Eventually, they are asked to sort by color, shape and size.

### **5.3.1 Theoretical discussion**

These examples above may be common in many preschool classes, and in other educational contexts where children are pre-readers and pre-writers and do not use books to read or write in. The teachers in these situations present an assignment that is conditioned, framed and well prepared. The aim and purpose with the activity is clear, at least to the teacher. This also indicates that the teacher is the one in control. Within these situations, there is no place for children's spontaneity or voluntariness. They are obliged to participate in a certain way. This is summarized in Table 3.

Even if these are playful, creative teaching moments with active children, this is not *play* according to theorists like Johnson, Christie and Wardle [23] as well as Huizinga [24]. These theorists contend that the essence of play is that it is freely chosen, children are having fun and are in control. In addition, they argue that playing involves disconnecting from the real world and stepping away from pressures. In these three examples above, the children all need to consider the pressure of both obeying, listening and performing. They need to consider that there are right and wrong answers, and they risk failing. They are committed to play in a certain way, a certain time and at a certain place.

**Table 2. The cultural play**

<b>Text</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Theoretical explanations</b>	<b>Category</b>
Children's constructions of play culture	Play is based on a set of activities, routines, artefacts, values and interests.	Play as a social construction and a cultural phenomenon [24]	Cultural play
	Play separated from learning and teaching.	Play creates a peer culture [26]	

**Table 3. The educational play**

<b>Text</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Theoretical explanations</b>	<b>Category</b>
Teachers use of play	Teaching within a playful framework.	Not play, but playful activities with a future (learning) perspective [23,24]	Educational play
	Play integrated with learning and organised in accordance to the curricula.		

However, this can also be considered teaching within a playful framework – or educational play [23]. For many children, these activities most certainly are fun and pleasurable – even if the conditions and structure in these situations are set by the teachers. There seems to be the opportunity of learning in these activities – if this “playing frame” does not blur the prospects of learning. However, it is not the play in itself that leads to learning; rather the aims and purposes of the activities, as well as the content within the activities, can offer learning. Playing is just part of the framework for the activity, within which learning may take place. This leads us to the future perspective of play [21]. The examples show how the teachers organize these play situations in accordance to the curricula – enhancing goals that children shall achieve. This implies that it is the curricula’s learning goals in different subjects that are the teacher’s educational focus, not children’s play per se.

## 6. DISCUSSION

This article is not about defining the right or the wrong use of play in the preschool class. Rather,

the article aims to illuminate and discuss the play that actually takes place, how play is used and conditioned and how the play used can be described. Play is an important aspect of the Swedish preschool class. However, few studies have been interested in how this is done and how play is used in the teaching in this educational context. This article can contribute to filling this gap of knowledge.

In this article, common and recurring situations where play is used are analyzed and categorized as *The optional play*, *The cultural play*, and *The educational play* (see Table 4).

*The category optional play* shows situations in which children's optional play is used as a filler and/or as a motivation for work done correctly. In these play situations, the teachers are neither participating nor active, which also contributes to marking a border between what is important (education) and what is less important (play) become clearly marked. Playing becomes something else, limited in space and time - and although the children are active, the teachers are in control over the play framework.

**Table 4. Overview of the results**

Text	Content	Theoretical explanations	Category
Children’s play	Children’s play as a filler, as a motivation and/or as a reward for job well done.	The essence of play [24,25]	Optional play
	Play as “something else”, separated from learning and teaching.	Play as a waste of time [29]	
Children’s constructions of play culture	Play is based on a set of activities, routines, artefacts, values and interests.	Play as a social construction and a cultural phenomenon [24]	Cultural play
	Play separated from learning and teaching.	Play creates a peer culture [26]	
Teachers’ use of play	Teaching within a playful framework.	Not play, but playful activities with a future (learning) perspective [23,24]	Educational play
	Play integrated with learning and organised in accordance to the curricula.		

*The category cultural play* describes one of many situations where the children create a peer culture which, in this example, is taken over by the teacher after a while. The original peer culture was created by the children themselves, and involved the children negotiating rules and standards based on their own conditions and terms. However, this play was excluding other children, which the teacher wanted to try to level out and succeeded in doing so, but at the expense of the children's own culture. The teacher took control of the play and made it into a part of the educational practice – which led to that children's own play culture got lost.

*In the category educational play*, the play becomes integrated in the teaching in a way that seems to create interest and curiosity in children. The teacher is active and participating, and the children work in a manner both playful and practical with school subjects such as the Swedish language and Mathematics. However, it is not the children but the teacher who has control over this form of play. The play is not separated from teaching - but rather a part of it. This also puts the children under the pressure of listening, obeying and performing – and above all, learning.

## **7. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Research has for a long time shown the importance of teachers meeting children's curiosity and desire to explore and learn through play. This article's contribution is to make visible how different forms of play that may exist in the same classroom. It is interesting to see how play often gets controlled and framed by teachers, and often closely tied to curriculum goals and learning subjects. Play thereby becomes more teaching than just play. By this, the future perspective becomes visible and closely tied to the playing activities in this preschool class. The aim of these playing activities is to contribute to any form of learning and development. This way of using play is closely linked to the concept educational play [23]. We can assume that the teachers try to motivate children to learn and develop by using play as a method to teach in a fun and active way. Learning through play can make learning meaningful, and if play can motivate children to learn, it is an excellent method for all teaching [23].

In the preschool class, play shall be used play as a method of teaching. However, children's own

playing activities shall also be promoted, as they are ways for children to test and develop their identities [1]. This is two different ways to approach and handle play in a pedagogical practice. In the first form, the teachers are active in organizing and framing playful learning situations. In the second, children are active in constructing their own playing activities. Using play may, from a teacher perspective, be a way to link preschool traditions with formal school education. Playing is something children will recognize from the preschool context, especially given that almost all children in Sweden attend preschool education. Play activities are present in most preschool classes but are used in a variety of ways and at different times.

However, in order to use play as a method for teaching teachers needs to reflect on what play is, how to use play, to what extent play shall be used, what the benefits of play are and how present oneself as a teacher needs to be in children's play. It is crucial that the teacher himself holds a definition of what play is and how it is going to be used. In this article, as in previous research, it is shown that play in the preschool class seldom is "free". Rather, the play is conditioned and framed by the teachers (present or not present), and children are committed to play in a certain way and a certain time. In addition, the play is often closely linked to educational goals and to other frameworks in order to create a "good practice". Using play as a method to achieve educational goals raises new questions about the conditions of play.

There are of course limitations with this study. The fact that the empirical material comes from only one preschool class can, of course, restrict the findings. However, the study does not claim to quantitatively describe play. Rather, the study aims to qualitatively analyse and discuss how play is used and conditioned in this preschool class and describe how this play can be understood.

One could also ask why these and not other situations and examples of play were selected for this article. Being on the field for a longer period of time (in this case, 10 months) did facilitate in the selection of play situations. The situations discussed were the recurring and most common sorts of play in this particular preschool class. This is the gains with a longitudinal study. These examples from this particular preschool class, as well as the analysis and results, cannot be generalized. However, the analysis has been

based on a desire to illuminate and discuss the use of play, and a desire to provide a theoretical description of the empirical data, with the aim to contribute to an overall reasoning about play.

The pedagogical and educational implications that can be highlighted from this study is however general - the importance of teacher's discussions and reflections about play. Through these reflections, teachers themselves must define the importance of play and how play can be promoted and organized to benefit children's further learning.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is very grateful to all the reviewers for their constructive suggestions for improvement this paper.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

### REFERENCES

1. Skolverket. Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet 2011, reviderad 2016. Stockholm: Wolters Kluwers; 2016. Swedish.
2. Ackesjö H. Barns övergångar till och från förskoleklass. Gränser, identiteter och (dis-)kontinuiteter. Kalmar: Linnéuniversitetet; 2014. Swedish.
3. Ackesjö H, Persson S. The educational Positioning of the Preschool-Class at the Border between Social Education and Academic Demands – An Issue of Continuity in Swedish Early Education? *Journal of Education and Human Development*. 2016;5(1):182-196.
4. Persson S. Förskolans Janusansikte. In: *Riddersporre B, Persson S, editors. Utbildningsvetenskap för förskolan*. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur; 2010. Swedish.
5. Simeonsdotter Svensson A. Den pedagogiska samlingen i förskoleklassen. Barns olika sätt att erfa och hantera svårigheter. Göteborg: Göteborgs Universitet; 2009. Swedish.
6. Karlsson M, Melander H, Peréz Prieto H, Sahlström F. Förskoleklassen – ett tionde skolår? Stockholm: Liber; 2006. Swedish.
7. Skolinspektionen. Undervisning i förskoleklass. Kvalitetsgranskning, Rapport. 2015;03. Swedish.
8. Garpelin A, Hellblom-Thibblin T, Sandberg G, Andersson S. Hur klarar skolan åtgärdsgarantin - att ge stöd åt alla barn, att kunna läsa, skriva och räkna när de lämnar årskurs 3? Västerås: Mälardalens Högskola; 2009. Swedish.
9. Ackesjö H. Läraridentiteter i förskoleklass. *Berättelser från ett gränsland*. Göteborg: Göteborgs Universitet; 2010. Swedish.
10. Øksnes M. Hvis der er noe vi ikke får lov till, så sniker vi oss til det: Perspektiver på fritid och barns muligheter til å skape alternative fluktlinjer. Trondheim: NTNU; 2008. Norwegian.
11. Øksnes M. We sneak off to play what we want! Bakhtin's carnival and children's play. In Ryall E, Russell W, MacLean M, editors. *The philosophy of play*. London: Routledge; 2013.
12. Øksnes M. Lekens flertydighet: Om barns lek i en institutionaliserad barndom. Stockholm: Liber; 2011. Swedish.
13. Russell W. The dialectics of playwork: An ethnographic study of playwork using cultural historical activity theory. Gloucestershire: University of Gloucestershire; 2013.
14. Sutton-Smith B. *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1997.
15. Ihrskog M. Fritidshemmet som utgångspunkt för identitetsutprovning. In Klerfelt A, Haglund B, editors. *Fritidspedagogik – Fritidshemmets teorier och praktiker*. Stockholm: Liber; 2011. Swedish.
16. Haglund B. Pupil's opportunities to influence activities: A study of everyday practice at a Swedish leisure-time centre. *Early Child Development and Care*. 2015; 185(10):1556-1568.
17. Ackesjö H, Dahl M. Det bästa med fritids var att kompisarna var där. En diskussion om meningsfull fritid och hållbar fritidspedagogik. In Klerfelt A, Haglund B, editors. *Fritidspedagogik – Fritidshemmets teorier och praktiker*. Stockholm: Liber; 2011. Swedish.
18. Hjalmarsson M, Löfdahl A. Fritidshem som en arena för barndomens kulturella styrning. In Jensen M, Fjällhed A, editors. *Barns livsvillkor i mötet med skola och fritidshem*. Lund: Studentlitteratur; 2013. Swedish.
19. Tullgren C. Den välreglerade friheten. Att konstruera det lekande barnet. Malmö: Malmö Högskola; 2004. Swedish.

20. Kane E. Playing practices in school-age childcare: An action research project in Sweden and England. Stockholm: Stockholms Universitet; 2015.
21. Øksnes M, Knutas A, Ludvigsson A, Kjær B. Lekens rolle i skandinaviske skolefritidsordninger og fritidshem. Barn. 2014;32(3):107-123. Norwegian.
22. Hattie J. Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. London: Routledge; 2009.
23. Johnson JE, Christie JE, Wardle F. Play, development and early education. Boston: Pearson Education Inc; 2005.
24. Huizinga J. Homo ludens, a study of the play-element in culture. Oxford, UK: Roy; 1950.
25. Huizinga J. Den lekande människan: homo ludens. Stockholm: Natur Och Kultur; 2004. Swedish.
26. Corsaro WA. The sociology of childhood. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press; 2005.
27. Pellegrini AD. The role of play in human development. New York: Oxford University Press; 2009.
28. Sutton-Smith B. Play as a parody of emotional vulnerability. In Roopnarine JL, editor. Play and educational theory and practice, play and culture studies 5. Westport, CT: Praeger; 2003.
29. Caillois R. Man, play and games. Urbana Ill: University of Illinois Press; 1958/2001.
30. Cohen L, Manion L, Morrison K. Research Methods in Education. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Routledge Falmer; 2005.
31. Hammersley M, Atkinson P. Ethnography: Principles in practice. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge; 1995.
32. Graneheim UH, Lundman B. Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. Nurse Education Today. 2004;24(2):105-112.
33. Silverman D. Doing qualitative research. London: Sage Pbl; 2005.

© 2017 Ackesjö; This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

*Peer-review history:*  
*The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:*  
<http://sciencedomain.org/review-history/18119>