PLAY-BASED TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Edited by Bjarne Isaksen, Ronny Johansen and Janne Madsen

ADVANCES IN RESEARCH ON TEACHING

VOLUME 51

PLAY-BASED TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

To play as a teaching method in higher education is, naturally, most in use in teacher education and the authors in this special issue responded on an international call inviting them to write about their research on play-based teaching. These articles, all together, cover parts of the gap of knowledge of play-based teaching with adult students. Play-based teaching in teacher education is a method to underline a professional signature: the students ought to know about teaching because they are going to teach children. It also might be a way for the students to learn: they play and appropriate the knowledge at the same time, just as children do. Playing can also be seen as a framework for building relations: an arena where the students dare to take risks and reflect critically within the classroom and in collaboration with the other students. The articles in this issue show different perspectives of play-based teaching.

Keywords: Play-based teaching; playful approach; higher education; pedagogy; learning

This special issue on play-based teaching in higher education originated in a keen interest in play-based approaches in the education of future teachers. Therefore, we have, through an open, international invitation, invited researchers to contribute articles on various aspects of play-based teaching in higher education.

A substantial part of the articles is from the context of teacher education. Here, the development and importance of children's play are extensively covered for kindergarten and primary school, supported by a substantial body of research (Moe, 2019; Pellegrini et al., 2007; Smith & Pellegrini, 2008; Vygotsky, 2016). Regarding higher education, there is a notable gap in our understanding of how to apply playful approaches when educating ents becoming teachers or this Play-based teaching in higher education to prepare students for their future

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practice facilitating play among children is an important part of this, and we need to explore this further. Teacher education should educate students to play.

One could argue that this would be a teaching culture mirroring the students' future professional practice and thus acting as a signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005). A different aspect of a playful approach in higher education is the one aiming for students' own learning: How can playful teaching gain the students' outcome in terms of their own learning, not just as methodical ideas to bring into their future work life? Nørgård et al. (2017, p. 277) suggest that a playful approach to students' learning should offer them "knowledge through failing, risking, experimenting, wondering, constructing, and critically reflecting," as opposed to the "increasingly performative risk-aversive environment" you traditionally find in higher education. This idea has similarities to the concept of slow pedagogy (Ailwood & Ford, 2021), a slow, caring, deep learning culture with fewer academic goals and more time for discussion. In this background, one could argue that teacher education should educate students not just to play but also through play.

The research contributions in this volume place themselves differently within this field. Some articles investigate preschool teacher students who initiate play-based experiences with children; other articles focus on the play-based teaching of teacher students; some forward a more philosophical view, while others appear as practically oriented.

In the following, we give a short presentation of each contribution.

In her chapter on self-study, ***Bele*** explores playful pedagogy in postgraduate teacher education, emphasizing its benefits and challenges. It enhances teacher development through engagement and reflection but can disrupt traditional dynamics. A central finding is that using playful pedagogy thoughtfully promotes deeper learning, builds rapport among students and teacher-educators, and creates a more positive and collaborative learning experience. Key elements for success include planning, demonstrations, reflection, and emotional intelligence, ultimately fostering deeper learning and positive, collaborative environments.

Tesikova and Berta's study is one of two articles in this volume, focusing on Conceptual Playworld (Fleer, 2011). The study highlights the importance of play in children's holistic development and the challenges kindergarten teachers face when engaging in play. They explored the Playworld approach to improve adult-child interaction, emphasizing its value in bridging the gap between theory and practice in kindergarten teacher education programs. Central findings are that although Kindergarten students had theoretical knowledge about the adult's role in play, they expressed discomfort and held varied perceptions about their active involvement in play with children. Integrating the Playworld approach into kindergarten teacher education programs serves as a valuable tool for exposing students to hands-on play experiences with children in higher educational settings.

Bjerknes, Lund, Sæterstad, and Kjæret also explore the Playworld method inspired by Fleer's (2011) conceptual play in kindergarten teacher education. The authors find that student experiences from Playworld settings scaffold

students to become more confident co-players in children's imaginative play and improve engagement and inclusion. Further, they find that the students improve their relationships with the children and their competencies in sustained play inspired by picture books for children and problem-solving adapted for the age of the participating children.

Also, ***Wiik, Dardanou, and Karlsen*** frame the activity in a kind of play world, but they use a preset world organized by a local Norwegian Children's Museum. They explore in their study how kindergarten teacher students and mentors understand play-based learning in this setting. They highlight the role of play in child development, the importance of responsive mentoring of the students, and the importance of collaboration between the students and their mentors in play-based activities. The museum seems to be of high value as a learning environment. One finding is the importance of the practicum mentor's role for the student's learning outcome. The mentors are acting role models for the students when facilitating children's play. At the same time, students must be allowed to develop their own role as teachers.

Kehlet, Brødsjø, and Bang investigate in this self-study article the impact of playful learning activities on students' learning experiences in kindergarten teacher education. Findings highlight the importance of variation, coherence between theory and practice, and support for the students' cultural change and personal growth. The potential of playful learning seems to be high, and the students' competencies increase even though it contrasts with traditional teaching, which demands higher efficiency and focus on curricular goals.

Zeuthen explores how play-based learning for preschool teacher students strengthens competencies like motivation, engagement, and creativity, as these are features characteristic of playing. Zeuthen is also interested in the students' learning outcomes, as they are supposed to learn what is listed in the curriculum. He separates this from a *bildung* process where the students learn generic competences such as creativity, the courage to fail, and collaboration. His case study shows that while acquiring curricular content is challenging, the interconnected play activities enhance learning. Successful play-based learning requires balanced preparation and integrates learning to and learning through.

A Danish intervention introduced playful learning in teacher colleges to enhance creativity and engagement and is explored by ***Sortkaer et al.*** They track 2,300 students and examine preferences for playful teaching and its envisioned use in future classrooms. Frequent exposure increases preference for playful teaching but does not significantly change intentions to use it in future practice. Findings show that average preferences and future-practice thoughts remain broadly stable across the year, but that students who often encountered playful teaching grow to prefer it more.

Often, games are described as play. This can be board games, sports, both competing individually and in teams, or digital games. The study, by ***Sandberg and Lofthus***, examines integrating play-based learning in Norwegian teacher education by use of digital games, like Minecraft and escape games. The authors relate their findings to the theory of play; even though these theories are mainly written for play-based teaching of children, this theoretical fundament seems to

function also when analyzing data from adult education. Four themes are highlighted in the text: fostering 21st-century skills, inclusivity, balancing traditional and play-based learning, and the impact of game design and facilitation. The results show that the students (who are also teachers in primary and lower secondary school) valued games not primarily for learning the content of the curriculum but rather for learning creativity, communication, and cooperation.

Johansen and Madsen explore the conditions for playful teaching in the context of Norwegian teacher education for primary school. Through a case study, it is shown how playful teaching is constrained by the main culture of teaching in higher education when it comes to effectiveness and the use of time. Just as importantly, a playful approach is constrained by a restricted concept of play and how it was understood by the lecturers, especially when it comes to adult play within higher education. This leads to the danger of significant features of both children's play and adult play being left out.

We hope that you will read each of the papers and that this issue will provide the readers insight into what play-based teaching can be. We also hope that this will inspire further research and investigation in play-based teaching in teacher education.

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CHAPTER 1

THE POWER OF PLAY: FOSTERING *BECOMING* THROUGH PLAYFUL PEDAGOGY IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In this self-study, the author shares their use of playful pedagogy in one teacher education course, emphasizing its potential and complexities. The author draws on the theoretical perspective of becoming*, where teachers and teacher-educators are seen as constantly evolving through experiences and self-reflection. Playful pedagogy is introduced as a tool that can enhance the* becoming *teacher process while fostering a more engaging and humanizing learning environment. However, the author also acknowledges that playful pedagogy can evoke discomfort and challenge traditional power dynamics. The author identified careful planning, clear demonstrations, reflection, and emotional intelligence as crucial aspects of successfully implementing playful pedagogy. Ultimately, the author has learnt that using playful pedagogy thoughtfully promotes deeper learning, builds rapport among students and teacher-educators, and creates a more positive and collaborative learning experience.*

Keywords: Playful pedagogy; becoming; self-study; teacher education; creative arts

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INTRODUCTION

I work at a research-intensive university in South Africa as a Creative Arts teacher-educator. My teaching philosophy is inspired by playful pedagogy (explained in the following subheading), and I am working toward deepening my understanding and refining it through integrating playful approaches in my teaching practice. Playful pedagogical approaches in higher education are an emerging phenomenon (James & Nerantzi, 2019; Lubbert et al., 2021; Nørgård et al., 2017). Emerging research indicates a growing interest in integrating playful approaches in higher education (Abegglen et al., 2021; Holflod, 2022). Nevertheless, the research on the use of playful pedagogy in higher education still lacks robust, empirical, and conceptual foundations (Koeners & Francis, 2020). Despite this underdevelopment, Nørgård and Moseley (2021) acknowledge the emerging intersection between academia and play. They encourage academics from all disciplines to explore and engage in robust research to develop the field of play/ing/ful in higher education, similar to its established presence in early years and primary schooling contexts.

As a teacher-educator, I acknowledge that playful approaches in higher education may be seen as unconventional (Lubbert et al., 2021). This is likely due to the association of play with childhood (Lubbert et al., 2021), raising concerns about its validity for adults. Despite this perception, Smith (2019) asserts that the value should never be limited to childhood only. To demonstrate this, Kangas et al. (2017) have highlighted how playful teaching fostered positive student outcomes, including increased learning and satisfaction with the learning environment. Furthermore, Nørgård and Moseley (2021) highlight the ability of playful pedagogy to cultivate curiosity and creativity in both academics and students. Exploring this concept further, this self-study examines the integration of playful pedagogy in one teacher education course, through the following question: What have I learnt about playful pedagogy through its integration into my teacher education course? To examine this, I share how our use of childhood indigenous games in teaching has enabled us (students and I) to build rapport, mitigate discomfort, and embrace comfort through a classroom experience of learning about playful pedagogy.

LITERATURE: GETTING INTO PLAY

Childhood play is a phenomenon that has been widely researched in various fields such as psychology, sport, and education. Pioneering theorists Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), Donald W. Winnicott (1896–1971), Jean Piaget (1896–1980), and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and others offered conceptual and empirical views on play, which have widely inspired and influenced scholars to pursue research in various fields to expand knowledge on the concept of play. Some scholars like Garvey (1990), Pellegrini and Smith (2003), and Sutton-Smith (1999) have offered explanations about play and also described the characteristics that are associated with play activities. There has been a plethora

of research studies that have contributed to explaining what constitutes play and how it generally impacts learning; however, the focus has been limited to children and primary learning, not higher education. Play is described as a nonliteral activity that is intrinsically motivated and flexible in form and context; it brings pleasure and joy to the child (Zachariou & Whitebread, 2015). It is an intrinsically motivated activity that focuses on the process rather than the outcomes (Holmes & Hart, 2022), but this is not to say that the outcomes are unimportant. Caillois (2001, p. 6) explains that play is a "free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement." Paley (2009) explains that play is "the work of children," while Piaget (1976) explains play as "the language of childhood."

Play theorist Elizabeth Wood (2013) urges other theorists to be mindful of how play is understood. She argues as follows:

> Definitions of play should take into account different contexts as well as the cultures, interests, affective states and preferences of children at different ages. What counts as play will vary according to what is being played, the choice of play activity, and the knowledge dispositions that children transfer from their home cultures and everyday experiences.... (Wood, 2013, p. 10)

Elizabeth Wood's caution in how play is defined considers how the activity and locality of play may differ among contexts. This difference should never disadvantage any play activity and its locality, as that would disqualify other activities of play because they are played differently from what is accepted as play. Göncü and Gaskins (2007) and Göncü et al. (2007) support Wood's argument as they present an understanding of play as a cultural activity that is different in various contexts, arguing that the culture within which that context is embedded determines what the play may or may not be.

UNDERSTANDING PLAYFULNESS

To better understand playful pedagogy, it is important to delve into the concept of playfulness itself. Scholars define playfulness as a multidimensional personality trait encompassing characteristics like imagination, curiosity, humor, and a sense of adventure (Holmes & Hart, 2022; Liu et al., 2017; Wallin et al., 2021; Whitebread et al., 2017). Building on this idea, Lynn Barnett (1990) identified five key playful dimensions—cognitive spontaneity, social spontaneity, physical spontaneity, joy, and humor—that help researchers assess playfulness in individuals. Other researchers (Linde, 2021; Magnuson & Barnett, 2013; Proyer et al., 2019) echo these findings and highlight that these dimensions help researchers pinpoint the playful traits within individuals. In my opinion, in higher education, integrating playful pedagogical approaches within teaching and learning requires embracing playfulness, drawing on the playful characteristics and Barnett's (1990) key dimensions as described above.

UNPACKING PLAYFUL PEDAGOGY

Playful pedagogy is a growing area of interest among play theorists (Jensen et al., 2022). Researchers are actively contributing to our understanding of this concept. Harvard University's Project Zero team (Mardell et al., 2016, p. 2) defines playful pedagogy as "a systematic approach to the practice of playful learning and teaching." Wood and Attfield (2005, p. 27) offered a more detailed perspective in their book *Play, Learning and the Early Childhood Curriculum*. They describe it as "the ways early childhood professionals integrate play into learning and teaching environments, including pedagogical decisions, techniques, and strategies to support learning through play." Pyle and Danniels (2017, p. 276) add another dimension, viewing it as "a teaching approach involving playful, child-directed elements alongside adult guidance and scaffolded learning objectives." The consistent underlying concept among these explanations of playful pedagogy is the "playful" ability and playful activities for teaching and learning. It is also the adoption of playful strategies that enhance teaching and learning. For this study, our playful approach encompassed indigenous childhood games, which we also understood to be playful, and through them, we engaged to better understand playful pedagogy to enhance our teaching and learning. Therefore, the use of playful pedagogy in this study refers to the playful approaches which include games and playful/play-filled activities, which, in my understanding, all emanate from play.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: *BECOMING* TEACHERS

The concept of *becoming*, a longstanding theory with roots in process philosophy, can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus. Heraclitus' theory of *becoming* directly challenged Aristotle's prevailing theory of *being*, which posited the cosmic as static and unchanging, while Heraclitus argued the world was fluid. He believed that change and impermanence are the only true constants. Inspired by this philosophy, many researchers have applied the concept of *becoming* to various fields, drawn to its emphasis on process and continual change (Bergroth & Vuorinen, 2019).

As a novice teacher-educator, I found Vinz's (1997) perspective on *becoming* insightful. She defined *becoming* simply as "the continuous reformulations of self" (p. 139), emphasizing the ongoing process of self-discovery and growth. Similarly, Dinkelman et al. (2006) describe it as "the crafting of a teacher's identity and practice over a period of time" (p. 5), highlighting the evolving nature of our roles as educators. Dorfler et al. (2017) further emphasize the intentional nature of this process, viewing becoming as a systematic process of continuous self-making" (p. 4).

Through the *becoming* lens, I have extended a "humanizing pedagogy" (Salazar, 2013) in my teaching. As I became more interested in *how* and *what* I taught, I also became interested in the learning experiences of preservice teachers. This shift opened me to reflection, intentionality, and patience as I remembered