

PLAYING WITH PLAY: CONSIDERATIONS FOR EMBEDDING OUTDOOR  
PLAY-BASED LEARNING INTO THE EARLY YEARS

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# ABSTRACT

Playing with Play: Considerations for Embedding  
Outdoor Play-Based Learning into the Early Years

Marlene (Marnie) Power

This thesis investigates the tensions, gaps and opportunities presented by outdoor play-based learning. Written by a founder of the Forest School concept in Canada, this exploration revolves around two research questions: How can we (re)conceptualize outdoor play-based learning in formal education for children aged 0-8, and how can we integrate and reinvigorate both pedagogical theory and practice to support educators in embedding outdoor playful learning practices?

The research methodology applies autobiographical experience and conceptual frameworks to historical and current pedagogical theory, in an anti-oppressive and feminist research orientation that challenges received notions of what “counts” as knowledge (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 6) – much in the same way that play challenges truisms about what constitutes education.

Key findings include situating outdoor play-based learning within the theoretical landscape, understanding outdoor play-based learning as an emerging current of environmental education, defining a set of core principles for outdoor play-based learning, and re-examining the role of the educator.

Keywords: Play, Risky Play, Play-Based Learning, Playful Pedagogies, Pedagogy, Early Years, Critical Theory, Early Childhood Education and Care.

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*“Play is a very misused adult word. To a child it is a way of life.”*

*~ Jean-Jaques Rousseau*

Based on a comprehensive body of research that makes the case for play-based learning in education (Alden, 2022; Parker, Thomsen, & Berry, 2022), this paper strives to move beyond the instrumental rationale or benefits of play in order to situate outdoor play – and specifically outdoor play-based learning – within the theoretical landscape to date. This placement can help to build understanding about both the insights and the tensions in and among various theoretical positions, while leaning on lessons from nature and play to ‘playfully’ re-examine what education really is. My aim is to illustrate the character and quality of outdoor play-based learning rather than to extol its capacity for bringing about any individual or socio-cultural benefit. Fostering a clearer concept of outdoor play-based learning offers a key opportunity to clarify why play-based learning offers the benefits that are so often ascribed to it. Within this conceptual analysis, I also aim to re-examine the role of the educator in outdoor play-based learning – especially the role that the educator’s subjectivity plays in the learning experience –while defining a set of key principles of outdoor play-based learning, with a particular focus on social justice principles that I believe are in alignment with play.

In her article, “Turning Experiential Education and Critical Pedagogy Theory into Praxis,” outdoor experiential education theorist Dr. Mary Breunig (2005) exhorts experiential educators to account for our own subjectivity when defining our praxis:

One of the first tasks of the critical educator is to explore her own subjectivity and “locate” or situate herself within that praxis. This process is both active and reflexive. Subjectivity, in this sense, represents an ongoing construction of the development of the personal lens through which one sees the world, and through which notions of reality and truth are shaped. (p. 116)

In consideration of this sensible exhortation, and out of a desire to recognize my own evolving construction of self, I write this paper as a settler who was born, raised, and roamed on the island of Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland), the unceded, traditional territory of the Beothuk and the Mi'kmaq. I note here also that am a cisgender queer woman and mother of two children who continue to teach me the importance of play; that I am currently a middle-class, educated adult who was once a child who lived in poverty; and each of these different positions of class experience resides in me, always.

The central research question of this paper asks how we can (re)conceptualize outdoor play-based learning as an effective and innovative practice in formal education for children aged 0-8 years old; and, from a teaching and learning perspective, how we can integrate and reinvigorate both pedagogical theory and practice to support educators in embedding outdoor playful learning practices.

This question emerges not only from the theoretical landscape noted above but also my own life experiences with play and nature. I started my life in a beautiful place surrounded by vibrant people with ample opportunities to roam freely and play. I spent my early years in “outport” Newfoundland—a small fishing village outside the main port of St. John’s—with many cousins and playmates. My house stood between my paternal strong Irish Catholic family at one end of the community and my maternal

English Protestant family at the other. Alcoholism, abuse, hidden narratives and family secrets were the undercurrent of the everyday. As a child, I was impacted by this darkness while also benefitting greatly from what outport Newfoundland offered in the 1980s: a small, tight-knit community where people still lived off the land and spent their time fishing, gutting, salting, hunting, trapping, hanging, tanning, and chopping wood to stay warm.

While adults worked, children spent endless hours roaming the woods and being scrappy along the shorelines at all hours of the day. We walked the four-wheeler tracks in the woods to find fairies and screws, to touch the prickly thistle, and to search for the kittens that had disappeared one night into the fog.

At age five, I left the bay. Following a short stint in two other outport communities, we moved into social housing in town (St. John's) and became "townies," a term commonly used to refer to someone who moves from the bay to town, often with derogatory intent. This move coincided with my parents' separation, and I had very little contact with my father from that point forward.

My identity until that point had largely been based around family, freedom, and play in the bay. This move was a shock to my little system, and in addition to the other challenging conditions I faced as a child, could be considered an "adverse childhood experience," which, according to Carsley & Oei (2020) is defined as "potentially traumatic or stressful events occurring in the first 18 years of life" (p. 2). This forced me to explore some deep questions for a young child: Who was I now? Where would I play? Who would I play with?



In our social housing community, called Rabbittown, we had a community centre with great summer programming for children. In truth, though, our time for free play fundamentally changed with this move to town. My mom was now afraid we would be harmed or influenced by gangs. According to our neighbours, gangs had lit their car on fire one weekend just before we moved in. She was afraid there'd be needles or dangerous things in the sandbox at the playground behind our apartment. Suddenly there were no aunts or uncles out in the shed with a moose or cutting wood, nor was Nan baking bread and putting clothes on the line. In other words, the passive supervisors for our play were all gone.

I share this early childhood experience because I'm certain, forty years later, that this freedom, the imagination it cultivated, the play that had been entrusted to us, the sheer amount of uninterrupted time we had, and the risks we could navigate and balance by ourselves were all formative gifts. I also share this story because it highlights how my lived experience of play did not embody a romanticized notion of children frolicking in forests unhindered (although I do wish this for every child). Rather, our path to play can come from rich play experiences and can also simultaneously come from a place of loss, situated within social risk factors.

Similarly, my story also shines a light on the intersectionality found in play. As I mentioned above, I am a white, settler, cis-gender queer woman who grew up in poverty in outport Newfoundland. I also experienced trauma and abuse (adverse childhood experiences) throughout my childhood and teenage years. Today, I acknowledge that my definitions and conceptualization of play and the value and opportunities I see for

children and educators (particularly from marginalized communities and schools) are deeply rooted in the intersections of these experiences.

In my early career as a social worker working in a variety of community development and social service organizations, I had a keen interest in environmental education and how it related to my newly formed anti-oppressive practice. I also wanted to support community change in a way that included direct experiences in nature. During my last year at the Maritime School of Social Work at Dalhousie University, I had the opportunity to develop an Independent Study Course on experiential therapies, where we looked at the links between play, nature/environment, and art therapy. This was also an important seed for my future practice in community development.

The next pivotal experience on this path was working with an organization in Nova Scotia called Heartwood, where I had the opportunity to deliver a workshop called “Mentoring in the Outdoors with Youth,” as well as an Earth education program called “Earth Keepers.” It was there that I learned about Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model (Morris, 2019), and how to integrate environmental learning objectives through hands-on direct experiences followed by opportunities for reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation with children while we were outdoors near lakes and in fields and forests. At this organization, I found myself waking up for the first time to my own potential and the potential of others. While beginning to unravel the knots of my childhood, in my facilitation role that required play and playfulness, I also began to note how serious I had become, how difficult it was for me to ignite and invite my lighter childhood self, and how much work I had to do to get to a point where I could ‘play with play’ (as the title of this thesis suggests). These positive opportunities

at Heartwood, matched with unpacking my discomfort with play, were the catalyst for what I hope remains a lifelong career in outdoor play-based learning.

Throughout the years that followed, I worked in traditional social service organizations, including Children's Aid, Family Services, and Youth Group Homes in the Ottawa area. I also led the infant room in a licensed childcare program in Chelsea, Quebec, and later helped to start a small cooperative daycare in Ottawa. I learned a great deal from those experiences, including risk management, working with and serving vulnerable populations, advocating for services and funding, as well as the gaps and opportunities found in Ontario childcare licensing models, particularly as Ontario started to roll out Early Full-Day Kindergarten.

These early professional experiences in social work, in various ways, repeatedly pointed me back to environmental education. I launched Carp Ridge Forest Preschool just outside of Ottawa, Ontario, in the Fall of 2008. By this point, I had a preschooler of my own, so I was striving to create a nature-based preschool program that would meet my need for care and early learning for her, as well as my own professional desires.

While we launched the program with low initial enrolment, I invested significant time doing public relations to explain the Forest School concept and garnered a great deal more interest. While enrolment stayed moderate, I saw significant interest from educators, researchers and policymakers across Canada.

Although I had worked with early childhood age groups in licensed settings before, given that our program was outdoor based, my blueprint for this work came from a more traditional environmental and experiential education model with older children and youth, as well as adults who worked with youth. I wanted to support a connection to

nature for children in the early years of my program, and I moved forward with what I thought was the right approach, with guided hikes on trails, activities that I creatively found in various outdoor education resources, knowledge about nature that I would try to impart on the very young children in the program...and, in summary, it was a flop. It looked wonderful, and the children showed up, and the parents were pleased, but something crucial was missing.

Each day, the children would follow me on the trail from start to finish on my planned hike into the woods. They participated for as long as their busy little bodies and emerging minds could focus, but it became clear that I would need to rethink my model of experience, debrief, reflection, and experimentation. These children were two and a half years old to about six years old (this was in Ontario before the introduction of full-day kindergarten), and (not shockingly) they had no interest in my limited roll-out of Kolb's experiential learning model.

The land, the children, the Forest School itself: it was new territory for the children and the adults alike, and I slowly realized that I needed to lean into the children and what *they* were showing and telling *me*, and listen to the land and the natural world that was around us—allow it to show us the way. These bumps and “failures” were necessary for the surrender that had to happen for the real insight to begin.

In short, to recall Breunig's exhortation from the beginning of this introduction, my teaching praxis changed profoundly once I stepped back to consider my subjectivity within the educational experience. I began to provide fewer answers and instead initiated more shared pondering and wondering. Our shared and extended learning stretched out over the course of weeks and then months. I slowed down my to-do lists

and my agenda for the day. I didn't eliminate my teaching agenda entirely but rather took note of the expectations I placed on myself, the children and our days, and reduced the burdens and restrictions on our time together. As one educator I worked with said so eloquently, "We had a plan, but were in no rush to get there." And here's what it sounded like, from time to time:

*"Ohh, what's that sound over there? Jonny, did you hear that sound? Let's listen together..."*

*"Ahhh, Sam that's a very interesting question about the tree. What do you all think? Sam saw buckets on the trees over there, what do you think is happening? What season is it now?"*

*"Adele, wow, that's a great question. Do you mind repeating that question to everyone so we can find some answers together? Yeah, yeah, use that outside voice!"*

*"Ahhh, I see you, you are working so hard over there. Tell me, what are you trying to build? Will you let me know if you need my help with anything?"*

*"Brad, you're so close to finishing your shelter, you've worked so hard on your ideas for that and in building it. If you get stuck come see me, but I wanted you to know you've got this!"*

*"Kat, you love that puddle, look at your big rubber boots keeping you dry, that's awesome. I wonder where that puddle came from, do you remember if it was here last week?"*

I listened to what the seasons had to show me, what the deer corridors were telling me and the path they were carving for us, to the bears that showed up one spring

unexpectedly and stayed for the whole day, forcing us inside with noses pressed against windows, to the echinacea flowers and the bees and butterflies that gravitated to the large landing pad, to the streams and brooks that froze over a layer at a time creating the most extravagant winter slide just for us.

I also listened more to the children. They started showing me the way to the special places they called “home,” openly sharing with me their feelings, hopes, struggles, and learnings. This experience taught me how to meet children, and adults, where they are—and how, through compassion, persistence, and gradual exposure, people will find their own path to nature.

In slowing down this way, play emerged more prominently than ever before. When the children in my program had space and time, their play became authentic and more “magic” unfolded. The conversations deepened and ideas that we had barely touched upon when I was driving an agenda came out into the open and stayed for longer periods of time. I liken this sense of magic to the mental state of play that Csikszentmihalyi (1975/2000) terms *flow*. According to Gray (2013), in a playful flow state, “attention is attuned to the activity itself, and there is reduced consciousness of self and time. The mind is wrapped up in the ideas, rules, and actions of the game and relatively impervious to outside distractions. This state of mind has been shown, in many psychological research studies, to be ideal for creativity and the learning of new skills” (paragraph 14).

For instance, one child who had attended the forest preschool for almost a full year, spanning every season, would notice in our play near the stream that water levels changed depending on the season. These observations and ideas became shared

“wonderings” that led the children to follow the stream for days to ask “educative” questions like, “Where does the water come from?” and “Maybe there’s a rock that came into the creek and was blocking the way?” These questions led to inquiries and learning about water cycles, evaporation, erosion, sediments, and so much more, but were initiated by children through their play, making the experience powerful and meaningful. Learning was happening, both on purpose and by accident.

Over the next few years, the Forest School secured funding to bring together educators, researchers and an Indigenous scholar to begin to formally define our work and process. We created *The Forest and Nature School Guide: A Head, Heart, Hands Approach to Outdoor Learning*, which became the backbone of our collaborative efforts and identified the theoretical underpinnings of our work (Andrachuk et al., 2014). The theoretical consensus defined through this effort described Forest and Nature School as “Inquiry-Based, Emergent and Experiential Learning,” “Play-based,” and “Place-Based,” with a special nod to the role of storytelling and loose parts. Andrachuk et al. (2014) also describe the power of storytelling as a tool “to teach, engage, and provoke thinking. It can also be a jumping-off point for inquiry, a stimulation of the senses, a tuning into place, and even an elicitation of the imagination” (p. 32). Additionally, loose parts can be defined as “materials that don’t come with any specific set of instructions; children can make of them what they will” (Andrachuk et al., 2014, p. 34), and can include open-ended materials such as sticks, stumps, planks, twine, rope, tarps, tall grass, rocks, etc. At the time, there was very little discussion about how these learning theories connected, or the weight placed on each theory in practice across the country and in different settings.

At this point in time (2008-2014), and still today, early years Forest and Nature School programming in Canada has been largely offered within part-time, unlicensed childcare settings as a fee-for-service program, in home-based childcare settings, in partnership with municipalities or community-based organizations in the critical hours such as after school, weekends and summertime. Slowly, Forest and Nature school programming is growing in more formal settings such as licensed childcare and schools. As with any new program that launches in a vast country like Canada, within diverse regions, led by educators from diverse backgrounds and cultures, we can see diversity in approach and practice on the ground across the country. There is a need for continued, ongoing and rigorous discourse as we move forward to encourage both diversity across contexts and high-level unity of principles across the movement. In those early days, however, coming to any kind of consensus on an ethos of theory and practice at large was a feat in and of itself.

The diversity that makes formalizing principles challenging simultaneously enriches those principles and the praxis itself—since, as Brown & Strega (2005) discuss, a vital aspect of anti-oppressive research involves explicitly weaving our personal and political narratives, which are informed by who we are and how we live our lives. In their case, they are discussing the importance of this personal narrative in the research context: “This feminist ‘self-reflexivity’ about the research process constitutes a significant challenge to traditional understandings of the researcher as male, neutral, disinterested, objective, and disembodied” (p. 74). But the principle applies equally well to how *self* shows up in a play-based practice, how our personal narratives and



experiences weave themselves into our practice, and how it informs and intersects with the development of shared principles in the Forest and Nature School program.

In a 2022 report, Statistics Canada confirmed that the early learning sector in Canada is primarily comprised of women who have lower income and are members of low-income families, with 29.6% identified as a part of a visible minority group (Choi, 2022, p. 2). When exploring and conceptualizing outdoor play-based learning in the early years, it has been vitally important for me to look inward and to reflect upon play as it relates to both the personal and political lens. As a practitioner in the early years and a new researcher, I aim to conduct research and write in a way that is accessible, and to invite others to do the same, to tap into our individual and collective stories to inform how we understand and support play for and with children.

In summary, the children, forest and play have taught me many things, including the richness of this play-based pedagogical approach. Early in my career, I thought my success in Forest and Nature School would be the result of overcoming and, in many ways, disenfranchising my early traumatic childhood experiences, leaving them behind as I adopted an external and experiential approach. I can now see that my positionality – being a woman, having lived in poverty and social housing, the trauma, the challenges I faced being a single parent and identifying as a cis-gender queer woman —not only informs my teaching, but is vital to the play-based teaching process.

### **Methodology**

For this work, I have chosen autoethnography as my research methodology. Autoethnography is a form of ethnographic research whereby the researcher connects their personal experiences with the subject matter to a wider cultural, political and social

context in order to make meaning and build understanding (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis, 2004). I sought specific permission to use this methodology and apply autobiographical experience and conceptual frameworks to historical and current pedagogical theory. It is a weaving of sorts, a qualitative, non-linear, anti-oppressive and feminist research orientation.

According to Adams et al. (2015), autoethnography values the critical observation of an individual's lived experience and acknowledges how relationality impacts research and the creation of knowledge. Autoethnography highlights the importance of in-depth and careful self-reflection and aims to unpack and then move past the tensions and struggles that often impede action (Adams et al., 2015). It also aims to balance intellect with emotion, is a creative process, and has an over-arching aim towards social justice (Witkin, 2022).

In many ways I stumbled onto this research methodology. My career supporting outdoor play-based learning was more than a passion or a job. On a deeply personal level involving my inner child and opportunities for intense healing and growth, outdoor play offered a place to find meaning when the world felt overwhelming. It gave me hope in a life that was often fraught, whether that was as a child who experienced adversity, as an adult, or as a single parent. Outdoor play was so deeply integrated into my being and how I viewed the world that in some ways I found it difficult to remove my story from the unfolding concepts I was encountering in the literature. After conducting a literature review and exploring the key concepts that would inform my thesis, I sat down to write—only to find that I was blocked by own personal history and lived experience of play.

After working with a writing coach, I decided that I couldn't start writing my thesis until I wrote my own story down to explore the intersections of that lived experience with play, and so I started there. As I wrote, I began to see that it was this lived experience that made my work in the past rich and meaningful, not just for me, but for others. Correlating these intellectual concepts, weaving them with personal narrative, and embracing creativity in my academic pursuits felt worthy and important.

As the methodology became clearer to me, and as I saw value in this personal, critical and storied approach to research, I could also see how it reflected the principles of play as well as my background in social justice and anti-oppressive practice. Challenging notions of power, emphasizing the role of hard-to-measure concepts such as trust, freedom, and relationships, was central to the pedagogy of play that I had grown to espouse. It also challenged received notions of what "counts" as knowledge (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 6) – much in the same way that play challenges truisms about what constitutes education.

## **Context and Rationale**

### **1.1 A Short Summary of What's Possible Through Play**

There are many documented benefits of adopting a play-based approach to learning, particularly in the outdoors. According to Leggett & Newman (2017), high-quality early childhood education and care positively correlate with learning through play (p. 2). From a research and practice perspective, play continues to be identified as a quality marker, and highlighted in policy standards internationally (Leggett & Newman, 2017, p. 2).

A growing evidence base suggests that when children learn through play, and more playful conditions, the positive impacts on learning are great. These documented benefits include learning being sustained over time, skills gained through play being transferred in the classroom to novel problems, greater recall of knowledge, deeper understanding of concepts learned, and an understanding of the interconnectivity between concepts being presented (Parker, Thomsen, & Berry, 2022, p. 4).

While outdoors, children are offered a depth and diversity of experience not easily matched through other pedagogical channels. As one educator said in a course I delivered in Calgary, Alberta, “When I teach outside, I am no longer the momentum; nature becomes the momentum and impetus for all learning.” When the outdoors becomes the classroom, we lose the structure and reverberation of the four walls that once contained us, and we are instead offered an ever-changing classroom in the landscape that surrounds us. Daily, sometimes hourly, there are changes to the weather we are immersed in and subject to, compelling students and teachers alike to notice and

adapt. One minute there could be wind; the next, rain, hail or something equally alluring.

Seasonally, offerings move slowly over time, but support, enhance and change the play that can unfold. For instance, in some locations in the Fall, the temperatures drop, trees change colour, leaves drift to the ground, and the ground begins to harden, bracing itself for the chill to come and thus offering an abundance of loose parts on the forest floor – provocations for deep inquiry. In the winter, some children are graced with snow and extreme cold, offering new fort and shelter options, animal tracks identifying visitors at night that can be followed through the forest in the morning. In the spring, as the snow melts, pools of water and new ponds can be formed, invitations for water-filled rubber boots, what we have called "soakers," and child-made bridges to 'the other side' of safety.

According to Alden (2022), these offerings provide children and educators alike with more room to move and the freedom to explore, be curious, and dive deeply into the things that pique their interest and further fuel their curiosity, all while being allowed to make noise and get messy, which is harder to attain inside four walls (pp. 24-25).

Naturally, just as there are benefits for children in the learning process through play, there are also benefits for the educator. According to Alden (2022), many educators believe that the outdoors provides unique and superior learning potential (p. 25). Furthermore, educators report increased enjoyment and overall well-being while teaching outdoors (Niblett et al., 2020). According to Alden (2022), educators also report "finding natural play spaces more interesting" (p. 27), and have reported a sense

of professional renewal as they engage in an outdoor play-based pedagogical practice (Alden, 2022; Bilton et al., 2016; Elliott & Chancellor, 2014; Niblett et al., 2020).

The benefits to the natural world from outdoor play-based learning are more challenging to quantify. Alden suggests that through increased exposure to outdoor environments, and through an outdoor play pedagogy, children begin to appreciate nature, which in turn contributes to overarching environmental sustainability goals (Boileau et al., 2021; Alden, 2022). Anecdotally, in my professional experience when I've supported play-based learning approaches in the outdoors over an extended period, over many seasons, what I have witnessed is a growing care and reciprocity in the relationship that is formed between nature and child. I have witnessed children, as they play, follow their curiosities and get to know the land they are on, slowly begin to build a relationship with their surroundings as if it were another caregiver whom they can trust and even love. The benefits of this trusting and loving relationship are what some would call a gamble and investment in the long game, with a hope that this child, through the trusting and loving relationship, will learn to care for and protect the broader environment as they grow.

Niblett et al. (2020) highlight how this outdoor play-based approach to early learning has the transformational potential to move our mindsets and actions away from a reactionary crisis response to the climate crisis. Instead, and perhaps more developmentally in keeping with the early years, we can “play a critical role in the developing landscape of early childhood education in the Anthropocene” (p. 69), whereby we position ourselves and children as “co-collaborators with the more-than-

human world rather than burdened saviours of our damaged planet.” (Niblett et al., 2020, p. 69).

Lastly, as children connect to outdoor environments that are easily accessible to them in the communities where they learn, potentially even the communities where they live, they are beginning to build an identity of self that involves place. According to Alden (2022), place-based learning shifts the emphasis away from merely learning about a place and instead focuses on “being with a place” (p. 7), which means rooting all learning in nuances of place and the local community. I would extend this to say that the overarching goal of outdoor play-based learning is to offer opportunities to learn about, learn in, be with, belong to, and ultimately love the places we get to know and learn in over time. Play-based learning is relational, and therefore it is the relationships unfolding over time between the individual child and the outdoor environment they are in, the children and educator(s), and the children amongst themselves in play that offers meaning and transformational opportunities.

## **1.2 Terminology**

Defining outdoor play-based learning is a part of my task, although perhaps the absence of clarity around the definition of *play* reflects the mystery and magic of play itself. We can liken the abstract nature of *play* to concepts like *art* and *love*. It has many expressions and manifestations. Like an artist tackling their first brushstrokes on a fresh canvas, a musician jamming in a basement for years with no shows in sight, or a poet writing in the dark quiet of their bedroom at day’s end, *play* speaks to what we can gain from embracing the unknown, allowing imperfection, tapping into the imagination, and trusting a process with no end goal. In outdoor play-based learning, children and their

educators are doing just that: walking into the muddy unknown, engaging in a lengthy imaginative process, attuned to and uncovering the learning, and building trust to move deeper into their play. In short, though operationalizing a definition of play that is too restrictive may squelch some of the rich opportunities that are available in play and play-based learning, I nevertheless offer a glossary of terms that can paint a picture of the kinds of meanings I ascribe to ideas surrounding play, with the admonition that these not be used to limit the exploration and imagination that is essential to any ethos of play.

### **1.2.1 Outdoors and Nature**

I use the term *outdoors* instead of *nature* to include all environments across the outdoor and nature continuum. From a child's perspective, *nature* can be a small patch of trees in an industrial area where a licensed childcare program resides, a landscaped park, or a wilderness setting. PLaTO-Net, a global thought leadership group devoted to the study of play, learning, and teaching outdoors, defines *outdoors* as “any open-air, wild, natural, or human-made space, that may include a temporary or fixed cover (e.g., awning or roof) but maintain exposure to ambient environmental conditions” (Lee, Eun-Young et al., 2022, p. 12). Although play, learning and teaching opportunities, also known as *play affordances*, can vary from one outdoor setting to another, there is value and potential for deep play across this continuum.

In other words, as Gundersen et al. (2016) suggest, nature is “an ambiguous term and can mean many things, and what constitutes nature is contested and contextual. For children living in inner-cities, nature might include finding a butterfly on a flower in their backyard; for children living in peri-urban or rural areas it might be a forest or a wild stream.” (p. 118) Still, while Gundersen et al.'s definition of *nature* can be widely



adopted and applied, and recognizes that nature can indeed be found everywhere, it's important to note that access to nature doesn't just mean proximity to greenspace across the nature continuum. Access, as it relates to children and nature, is a more complex construct.

Gundersen et al. (2016) highlight how the term *access to outdoor spaces* involves more consideration than mere physical availability and proximity to green space. Access also involves sociocultural barriers and constraints such as income, which could impact a parent's ability to wash clothes made dirty through play on a regular basis; immigrant and refugee status and experience, which can alter and impact childhood memories of being outdoors and perceptions of physical and emotional safety; housing security and a family's mobility, which can impact crisis response levels and leisure time; crime levels in nearby neighborhoods, which can impact real and perceived safety concerns affecting children's play and mobility; and traffic levels and urbanization, which have resulted in streets and pathways no longer being walkable or perceived as safe for children. These examples illustrate the complexity of access and what I've been calling *play insecurity*, a concept akin to terms like *housing insecurity* and *food insecurity*, particularly when we understand play as a ratified right for all children and our role as adults to overcome these challenges and barriers to assist children in their quest for play (McKendrick et al., 2018). In summary, I suggest that we live in a time where *play insecurity* is ever-present, and can be defined as inadequate or insecure access to play opportunities in childhood as a result of the complex sociocultural and systemic factors listed above. Like food and housing insecurity, I pose

that *play insecurity* is a serious public health problem, a marker of pervasive developmental deprivation, and a matter of public policy.

I experienced these constraints as a child in social housing. Yes, there was a park and a creek and playground at the bottom of my downtown St. John's street, but my mother and neighbours greatly feared letting children roam the area unsupervised because of traffic and busy streets, visible drug use, the potential for gangs and teenagers to assert negative influences, violence and domestic conflict in our apartment buildings, fears of us coming into contact with drug paraphernalia on the street, or the perceptions held by Child and Protective Services, who visited our street regularly.

As an adult and educator, I personally hold a special fondness for wild natural spaces—the spaces outside the fence that aren't easily contained and aren't manicured. In my personal life, these wilder spaces have offered healing, stillness, adventure, hope, and peak experiences that I will carry with me always. This personal fondness for wild spaces is also supported in research, which suggests that

...boreal forests with a high degree of naturalness, including a high diversity of different structural elements (dead wood, old trees, mixed trees etc.) and spatial diversity (gaps, multilayered etc.), may fit with children's landscape preferences and give many opportunities for play...Forests can provide more unstructured environments that provide places where children can alter and manipulate the landscape themselves. These factors should be crucial for the management of nearby nature for children in order to provide an environment that offers a spectrum of play opportunities. (V. Gundersen et al., 2016, p. 123)

But our key exploration for the purposes of this discussion is how educators can access nearby *nature*, the *outdoors*, and foster an ongoing, trusting relationship with children that spans seasons, across extended periods of time in these *outdoor* and/or *natural* spaces.

### **1.2.2 Play**

Defining *play* itself is a harder task. According to O'Connor et al. (2017), “Play research covers a vast domain. Philosophers, theorists, psychologists and educators have been researching the topic of play and its value for centuries. While there is a shared consensus that play has a positive effect on children’s overall development and learning, play has proved to be extremely difficult to define” (p. 10). Additionally, notions of play vary from culture to culture. Shuffelton (2012) notes that “cross-cultural researchers have observed that children all over the world use whatever scraps of time and material resources they can glean to play. What form that play takes, though, depends heavily on social context” (pp. 317-318). Shuffleton goes on to say:

Children play at what the adults around them are doing, and adults influence their play in other ways as well. As they observe adults and gain increasing mastery of the scripts of everyday life (for example, cooking dinner, making a phone call, going to the doctor’s office), children play out narratives that incorporate these scripts, though often with interesting embellishments, shifting of roles, and intermingling of different scripts. Furthermore, adults pass down values through the toys they give children, inasmuch as the toys provide the material props for imagined scenarios. (p. 318)

Although play varies across cultures and landscapes, through a comprehensive consensus-based terminology, taxonomy, and ontology process, researchers have recently defined play generally as a “voluntary engagement in activity that is fun and/or rewarding and usually driven by intrinsic motivation” (Lee, Eun-Young et al., 2022, p. 12). Outdoor Play Canada (2022), in its Glossary of terms, defines play as in more expansive ways. Through their definition, play can be viewed in a multitude of ways and within the context of many settings. For example, not all play is self-directed and intrinsically motivated. It can occur sporadically and is often identified as unstructured, though can also include activities or games with rules. Adjectives frequently used to describe play include freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated, spontaneous, and fun. Furthermore, they identify that “children and youth need the time, appropriate space, and affordance to engage in quality play” (p. 2).

Early play theorists Rubin et al. (1983) characterize play as behavior that is intrinsically motivated; focused on means rather than ends; distinct from exploratory behavior; nonliteral (involves pretense); free from externally imposed rules; and actively (not just passively) engaged in by the players. This early definition of play is aligned with and has greatly shaped growing (and waning) play movements, including Forest and Nature School, as well as the playwork field.

Not unlike love, play can be interpreted in many ways, although there is often consensus that children are concerned with means and process over ends, that the behaviour is enjoyable even if it sparks a range of emotions, and that the experiences are often seen from the untrained eye as purposeless, or rather, happening for their own sake rather than external rewards (Martin & Caro, 1985; Rubin et al., 1983; Smith &

Vollstedt, 1985; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Put more simply, the Welsh Assembly Government's (2002) definition of play is defined as experiences that are "personally directed, intrinsically motivated and freely chosen" (p. 3).

### **1.2.3 Play-Based Learning**

Just as there is no one definition of play, there are also many different definitions of play-based learning, with varying perspectives on how it should be practiced and supported within more and less formal learning settings. Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson (2006) assert that play is an experience led by and for children, with minimal involvement from adults and careful attention by adult supervisors not to hijack the experience. Many educators and play advocates aligned with this philosophy would argue that play for the sake of play is indeed enough and will naturally derive learning outcomes that children can uncover over time rather than those that adults predetermine and lead. From this perspective, even in a learning setting, children's play is not meant to be disturbed, and adults should not impose their agendas on it.

An alternative perspective on play-based learning sees play as a portal to explore academic concepts through a developmentally appropriate means, whereby teacher engagement is necessary to further learning and deepen play (Pyle, & Danniels, 2017, p. 276). This school of thought aligns with emerging research on play-based learning that suggests the least effective learning environments were those that fostered long periods of uninterrupted, undirected, free play (McLachlan, Flear & Edwards, 2010).

Increasingly there is an acknowledgement among researchers and educators alike that educators have a role in play-based learning, and that as a learning modality it is most effective when it's interactive and when educators are skilled in their supportive role

(Leggett & Newman, 2017). According to Leggett & Newman (2017): “educators’ understanding and awareness of the pedagogical role in sustaining children’s thinking is vitally important for implementing a play-based curriculum.” (Leggett & Newman, 2017, p. 25).

What can be found with these varying perspectives on the definition of play in learning settings is tension, the creation of dichotomies and the positioning of play as a binary with one camp holding onto a purist notion of play while the other camp is either at a loss as to how to implement play in education (so they avoid doing so), or tries to find a path to play that also allows for their historical role as educators to be recognized and valued. These types of binaries can drive othering and alienation, with little room to just ‘play with play,’ and approach play as a fluid experience that allows for pedagogical progression.

One way to define and enact play-based learning in a way that avoids this binary, offering flexibility and fluidity, is to position this teaching approach as a continuum of experiences that involve playful, child-directed experiences alongside meaningful educator guidance and scaffolding, whereby the role of the educator is fluid and adaptive (Weisberg et al., 2013; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). According to Pyle, this continuum of play-based learning is

entirely child centered, emphasizing the importance of teaching academic concepts in an engaging and developmentally appropriate manner, expanding on children’s interests, and utilizing play-based strategies that match children’s abilities. However, not all types of play on the continuum are child directed, and

a distinction needs to be made between these two concepts (Pyle & Danniels, 2017, p. 286).

According to Pyle & Danniels (2017), this play-based learning continuum includes five distinct categories: learning through games, playful learning, collaboratively created play, inquiry play, and free play. All five play categories present essential opportunities for personal, social, and academic growth while incorporating various levels of adult involvement. The role of the educator along this continuum ranges from attuned observer to active leader of the playful experience, from providing space for free play all the way to learning opportunities through games that are teacher directed. The opportunity here is to embed play-based learning into existing educational frameworks, curriculum expectations, lesson plans, and pedagogical approaches.

Parker, Thomsen & Berry (2022) elaborate on the role of the educator in play-based learning, describing the educator as “guide, facilitator and mentor,” whereby “reflection, co-creation, freedom and independence, open-ended and hands-on learning are prioritized. Educators’ role is to foster agency, scaffold, share knowledge, monitor and facilitate discussion, coach, provide feedback” (p. 2).

This approach reflects a both/and mindset and aligns with my own early teaching experience at Carp Ridge Forest Preschool, where I learned to loosen the reins on my own strictly interpreted notions of experiential education and what I thought learning looked like and instead learned to slow down, listen to the children’s interests and the provocations offered in relationship with nature. Here, rich and meaningful play unfolded, and in response to it, I offered resources, stories, scaffolding, and inquiry that I built on over time.

In the professional development I've offered to educators and early childhood educators on play-based learning, through Forest School Canada, I have seen a robust engagement at both extremes of this play-based learning continuum, either a heavy reliance on games or games only that involve very little self-agency of the children, or free play with minimal involvement from and confusion about the role of the educator. From my perspective, the trick in implementing high-quality play-based learning is to ensure that you are dancing along the entire continuum in your practice, recognizing the value (dare I say necessity) of self-agency in the learning process that can effectively and developmentally be expressed through free play.

#### **1.2.4 Risky Play**

One can only conceptualize outdoor play-based learning by also discussing the inherent (and so often feared) risk found in play in the early years. According to Sandseter, Kleppe & Kennair (2023), "Risk and play have similarities or coincide, as the very nature of play provides experience with unpredictability and uncertainty" (p. 128). Risk aversion tendencies in Western society focused on a desire to limit this sense of unpredictability and uncertainty, and prevent physical injury, have resulted in decreased opportunities for outdoor play and play-based learning (Brussoni et al., 2012). A systematic review conducted in 2015 on risky play suggests the need to loosen the reins on childhood in order to ensure that children can benefit from the positive effects that play has on children's well-being and development (Brussoni et al., 2015).

Although there is great debate about whether to use the term *risky play*, *adventurous play*, or something different, my preference is to address risk straight on by using *risky play*, which was initially defined as "thrilling and exciting forms of physical



play that involve uncertainty and a risk of physical injury” (Sandseter, 2010). This definition rests on six categories of risky play: “(1) play with great heights, (2) play with high speed, (3) play with dangerous tools, (4) play near dangerous elements, (5) rough-and-tumble play, and (6) play where children go exploring alone.” (Sandseter, 2007, p. X). This original definition and categorization of risky play emphasized physical risk-taking and has since been expanded to include emotional and social risks.

According to Sandseter et al. (2023), “Play with emotional, social, and physical risk may have evolved to increase the child’s psychosocial competency here-and-now, but also train them for future adult contexts” (p. 127). This more comprehensive and holistic view of risky play reflects a post-pandemic world, a world where increased interest and dialogue are needed regarding children’s mental health and trauma-informed practice within and outside the classroom.

Within risky play, children seek thrilling and exciting experiences that involve exposure to physical danger, and they are also seeking both the positive and negative emotions that, as humans, make us feel alive. According to Sandseter et al. (2023)

Both positive and negative emotions (e.g. joy, discomfort, awkwardness, fear) from social and physical closeness with peers may be explored and mastered through play, including the risky play of rough-and-tumble. Social roles, competitiveness, and self-assertiveness may likewise be explored under in vitro forms, where the stakes are low, and the consequences are mostly psychological. One may learn how to empathically understand others’ intentions, motives, and mental states, and one may experience a breadth of different emotional states (p. 130).

The interactions between children and their environment, and the peer interactions that happen through play, support an “age- and skill-appropriate coping and mastery of the local ecology as well as the intrapsychic responses to the environment and behavioural interaction with it. This feedback process thus makes the maturing child able to develop ecological, psychological, physiological, and behavioural skills in concert” (Sandseter et al., 2023, p.130). Although the value of this whole-child, tandem skill-building opportunity is hard to argue against, there is often confusion around why and how this relates to learning and whether risky play should happen outside the confines of an early learning context. Western society's aversion to risk is not just happening at the individual level. With misconceptions and fears of liability, many organizations and educational institutions are set up to be highly regulated and also risk-averse.

What is at stake if learning and play are devoid of risk? As Sandseter et al. (2023) have pointed out, play and uncertainty go hand and hand, so the first outcome is already being realized, in that play, when devoid of risk, either doesn't happen, or becomes singularly focused, adult-directed, and on one side of the play continuum reflected as games, or adult-led activities, where outcomes can be closely monitored and prescribed. Children miss out on the opportunity to

...wage wars and build cities in the sandpit, form families and raise children in the dollhouse, and hunt and find fantastic beasts together in the forest. One may create games following arbitrary social rules and demand strict adherence to these rules. One may practice physical skills such as stealth, speed, strength or psychological skills such as cunning, strategy, manipulation or social coordination. One may compete without large consequences, where losing is less

dangerous than in reality. One may be a couple, practice kissing and engage in domestic disputes and breakup or divorce. (Sandseter et.al., 2023, p. 130).

John Dewey (1938/1963) proposed that ‘all genuine education comes about through experience’ (p. 25), and Kolb (2015), renowned for his work in experiential education, eloquently states that, “knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 49). Children in the early years experience and engage with the world through play. Simply put, play is the language of childhood. When children play and engage in risk, the educator is invited into their world as a co-conspirator in play, as well as a facilitator, interpreter and transformer of that experience.

One 2020 systematic review examining what constitutes a concrete experience in experiential learning unveiled five themes that can be found in all experiential learning activities: “Learners are involved, active participants; knowledge is situated in place and time; learners are exposed to novel experiences, which involves risk; learning demands inquiry to specific real-world problems; and critical reflection acts as a mediator of meaningful learning” (Morris, 2020, p. 1064). This summary reflects what can be found across the play continuum, highlights the role of the educator, and certainly affirms the value and necessity of risk in outdoor play in the early learning process.

### **1.3 Summary of Terms**

Based on the definitions derived from the literature reviewed above, for the purposes of this thesis, I define outdoor play-based learning as *learning that happens in the open air (outdoors) through a continuum of playful experiences that are developmentally appropriate, ranging from free play to more prescribed playful experiences, where the role of the educator is to support children’s self-agency in the*

*learning process while acting as a co-conspirator in play, as well as an observer, facilitator, interpreter and transformer of the playful experiences.*

The *early years* include children from 0-8 years old, encompassing early childhood education and care programs (daycare, nursery school, etc.), as well as school-aged children in kindergarten and the primary grades. This definition aligns with the Canadian Encyclopedia's definition of early childhood education and provides the opportunity to conceptualize how outdoor play-based learning can be expressed in a multitude of more formal and institutional settings.

#### **1.4 Unpacking the Problem**

As I have come to identify outdoor play-based learning as the underpinning of my own work over the course of my career, many related conversations have been unfolding across Canada around outdoor play. These conversations often debate contemporary problems: excessive screen time, sedentary behaviour, over-scheduling children's lives, fear of liability and risk, and lack of understanding about how to support play, particularly in learning environments. Proposed solutions include professional learning, knowledge dissemination, pre-service learning (college and university programs), incorporating more content and certifications on outdoor play, policy change, and much more.

This paper aims to explore the landscape of outdoor play-based learning in education, moving beyond the instrumental rationale and focusing on the character and quality of this approach. By examining various theoretical positions and drawing on lessons from nature and play, the paper seeks to re-evaluate the essence of education. The goal is not to emphasize the "why" of outdoor play-based learning, but to foster a

practical conceptualization of “how.” Additionally, the paper aims to reconsider the role of the educator in outdoor play-based learning, particularly the influence of the educator’s subjectivity on the learning experience. It also proposes a set of critical principles for outdoor play-based learning, specifically emphasizing social justice principles inherent in play. The underlying assumptions guiding this paper include the belief that play-based learning is effective for educators and children in the early and primary years, that children can thrive in formal learning environments when learning through play, that educators can incorporate play-based learning through incremental change and playfulness, and that change in education is possible.

*Play* has a long history in the field of education, with early philosophers and educational theorists laying the supporting roots that can still be felt in modern-day policy and best practices. According to the *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, representations of play span human history; for example, in physical evidence that children played with toys in ancient civilizations (“Theories of Play,” n.d).

The first reported and known reference to play as it relates to learning made its appearance in ancient Greek philosophy, through the work of Plato (427-348 B.C.E.) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.). In both cases, play in education was presented as “anticipatory socialization” (paragraph 5), meaning that it was valuable when directed by the teacher and used to manipulate natural childhood impulses and that this play ultimately served the needs of the state. In other words, any form of play that involved imagination, freedom, self-direction, the creation of new rules and order, or pleasure

was strictly forbidden because it threatened the order of the state and the laws that governed it. (“Theories of Play,” n.d).

We can see the historical progression of thought around play and learning in the evolving debates and tensions, which we are still dealing with today. For instance, John Locke (1632–1704) believed that learning should happen through recreative means and not through coercion. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) similarly espoused that children learn far more through interactions with one another in play than what was possible in the classroom. Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849) saw the roots of the scientific process through the presence of observation, experimentation, and discovery that was visible in children’s play. Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) pushed the boundaries of play’s role in education by introducing us to the potential that free, unregulated play could have when placed at the centre of how children should learn. Jean Piaget (1896–1980) shone a light on the significance of play in how symbolic representations contributed to children’s socialization. Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) situated play as social construct and furthered Piaget’s theories in advancing notions of how play, in particular role playing, supported language development. Finally, Jerome Bruner (b. 1915) built on play as it relates to language development through exploring problem solving (“Theories of Play,” n.d). Additionally, Dewey (1916), a prominent and influential educational theorist to this day, pointed out “Doubtless the fact that children normally engage in play and work out of school has seemed to many educators a reason why they should concern themselves in school with things radically different. School time seemed too precious to spend in doing over again what children were sure to do

any way” (p.203). In spite of this social devaluation, Dewey goes on to extol the value of play:

Study of mental life has made evident the fundamental worth of native tendencies to explore, to manipulate tools and materials, to construct, to give expression to joyous emotion, etc. When exercises which are prompted by these instincts are a part of the regular school program, the whole pupil is engaged, the artificial gap between life in school and out is reduced, motives are afforded for attention to a large variety of materials and processes distinctly educative in effect, and cooperative associations which give information in a social setting are provided (Dewey, 1916, p. 202).

Today, evidence for the positive qualities of play-based learning in nature is mounting. As Leggett and Newman assert (2017), “western discourses of early childhood pedagogy promote a play-based approach to learning, growth and development” (p. 24). Additionally, as Parker, Thomsen and Berry note (2022), beyond the early years, “policy makers, researchers and educators have promoted the notion that learning through play is developmentally appropriate—as it leverages school-age children’s innate curiosity while easing the often-difficult transition from preschool to school” (p. 1).

However, play remains “a contested concept” (Leggett & Newman, 2017, p. 24). While there is a consensus that play belongs in education, researchers and teachers disagree on what constitutes play (Pyle, & Danniels, 2017). According to the *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, theories of play reflect the concerns of adulthood as much as those of childhood: “If the history of theories of

children's play illustrates anything, it is that play has far too many social ramifications to be left to children and that the theories are as much about a conception of adulthood—and what the child should become—as they are about childhood.” (“Theories of Play,” n.d).

As we can see, play in and of itself has value, and playful experiences are inherently educational. However, play in the service of learning is often debated, particularly when exploring the gaps between theory, policy and practice, as well as when examining the role of the educator. Adding to this debate, Parker, Thomsen, and Berry (2022) identify five challenges that, in their view, impede the implementation of play-based learning: The complexity and challenges in defining play, including the dichotomy that situates play and learning in opposition to each other; play’s representation as a non-serious pursuit; the perception of play as something only applicable to the early years and incongruous to school and the primary grades; the lack of established instruments that can be used in play to support accountability and assessment frameworks in school settings; and the lack of discourse and understanding on how play-based learning fits into other, equally effective, constructivist pedagogies (such as inquiry-based learning, experiential learning, etc.).

Alden (2022) highlights several gaps in practice related to play-based learning outdoors. These gaps include the positioning of outdoor pedagogy in policy and practice, the interactions between educators and children, the actions taken by educators in practice, the planning process for outdoor programming, the effectiveness of scaffolding in diverse settings, the perception and utilization of the outdoor environment by educators, particularly with infants and toddlers, the relationships among educators, children, and the environment, the relationship between pedagogy and risky play, the



strategies employed to support risk, and the various influences on outdoor pedagogy and practice, including the role of policy in mediating pedagogy.

Further to these identified impediments and gaps, there are inconsistencies found in educators' pedagogical knowledge, as well as in their skill level in applying this knowledge in the outdoors (Niblett, Hiscott, Power & McFarlane, 2020, p. 68).

Breunig (2016) also points out the inconsistencies commonly found in the implementation process between theory and practice: "There is a lack of congruence between the pedagogical theories that are espoused and the actual classroom practices that are employed" (p.127). Although there are reoccurring gaps, tensions and sticking points found in play throughout history and modern-day practice, the aim of this paper is to shine a light on what's possible, and to explore how outdoor play-based learning can be offered along continuums of experiences as an exploratory and living practice of meaning-making with students.

In his article, "Curriculum as Lived: Towards a Poetics of Curriculum Inquiry," Canadian curriculum theorist Ted Aoki (1993) explores the concept of curriculum beyond its predetermined or end-goal orientation. Aoki argues for a shift towards engaging with the lived experiences that occur in pedagogical situations and relationships. He emphasizes the importance of understanding curriculum as something that 'happens' rather than something that is solely imposed on learners, in other words curriculum that is charged with life (Aoki, 1993). This concept of "curriculum as lived" invites educators to explore the ways in which curriculum manifests in the everyday experiences of young children and educators, and the importance of considering the lived aspects of curriculum and the socio-political context in which it occurs.

According to Nxumalo et al. (2018), our process as educators in exploring an emergent (playful) curriculum is not just a process of learning how to sit with uncertainty or gain a more child-centred approach to teaching. Rather, it's a process of unlearning, disrupting, and reconceptualizing our curriculum, situating young children's learning "within current conditions of late capitalism and its entanglements with the settler colonial, racist structuring and rampant extractive consumerism of everyday life." (p. 436).

As a manifestation of emergent curriculum, outdoor play-based learning "stands in contrast to, and is an important site of resistance to standardized and theme-based curriculum in early childhood education, including increasingly regimented modes of governing what children can do and learn in the classroom" (Nxumalo et al., 2018, p. 434). Although play is a natural expression of childhood, a developmentally and age-appropriate learning modality, Nxumalo et al. (2018) highlight that emergence and play also offer us sites to "destabilize and complexify the theory-practice" (p. 434) and "might be taken up as openings to situate early childhood curriculum within the actual, messy, highly uneven and extractive places and spaces of early childhood education" (p. 435).

Finally, a crucial acknowledgement that deserves serious scholarly and pedagogical attention: in a time of Truth and Reconciliation in Canada, play-based learning on stolen land, unceded Indigenous territory, has stirred great debate, grief and turmoil.

Historically, displacing people as a deliberate act of oppression included removing people from their traditional territories, preventing access to natural resources

and limiting their ability to work on, recreate, or engage in spiritual practices in the natural world. Scully (2012) notes that “one of the legacies and continuing practices of colonialism in Canada is the continuing perception that the land is separate from people” (p. 152). Still, the process of pedagogical practice on this land, how pedagogical content is shaped, how discourse is supported, and who has access are all vital considerations. Foregrounding children’s radical relationality with the places and spaces of early childhood curriculum-making, including its more-than-human inhabitants, brings a decolonizing ethos to the curriculum that can potentially disrupt individualistic neoliberal formations and their consumptive manifestations in everyday life. (Nxumalo et al., 2018, p. 446).

We need to recognize the interconnectedness between people and the land and the importance of incorporating this understanding into educational practices that don’t involve cultural appropriation and instead offer meaningful engagement with Indigenous Elders, educators, scholars, and community members. There is an opportunity here, as Scully (2012) acknowledges, to keep “relation to place as an important site for cross-cultural understanding” (p. 152).

To conclude, I envision ‘playing with play’ as a deeply personal and reflective practice and a highly political one. Through examining play along a continuum of playful experiences, my goal is to offer an opportunity to conceptualize outdoor play-based learning in a manner that avoids the pitfalls of pedagogical sanctimony, a pedagogical progression and invitation to take part in the dance of play without the pressures extolled by more purist views of free, uninterrupted play on one end of the continuum or the apathy of inaction and the ticking of transactional play-boxes on the

other. In this conceptualization, I also hope to disrupt notions of play as a light (optional) offering within education, instead presenting play much like Nxumalo et al. (2018) presents an emergent curriculum: as an opportunity to destabilize and complexify the theory-practice.

## **2. Theoretical Framing:**

### **Situating Play in a Complex Landscape**

As the previous sections demonstrate, while play is an old construct, it is also still emerging within formal education. Play has long been recognized as a valuable tool for learning, particularly in the early years, but I suggest it is only recently emerging as a current of environmental education, an implementation of critical theory and liberatory practice, and part of a rich theoretical landscape that includes diverse and integrated pedagogical practices.

#### **2.1 Constructivist Theory**

In “Learning Through Play at School – A Framework for Policy and Practice,” the authors note how “Parker and Thomsen (2019) found that pedagogies that align closely with learning through play are those that arise from the same constructivist learning theories, namely active learning, collaborative and cooperative learning, experiential learning, guided discovery learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, and Montessori education” (Parker, Thomsen & Berry, 2022, p. 3). These constructivist pedagogical approaches are neither exhaustive nor neatly unified in their understanding of learning processes; they reflect a continuum of child-directed, teacher-guided and teacher led-learning (Parker, Thomsen & Berry,

2022). Accordingly, Parker and Thomsen (2022) used the term “playful integrated pedagogies” to collectively describe these approaches (p. 3).

Fosnot & Perry (1996) define *constructivism* as the leading psychology of learning whereby cognitive development and deep understanding becomes the foci, rather than specific behaviours or skills, which are the primary preoccupations of *behaviorism* and *maturationalism*. Rather than viewing learning as a linear process, with constructivism, learning “is understood to be complex and fundamentally nonlinear in nature” (pp. 3-4), where students and educators are actively and collaboratively engaged in constructing reality and shaping learning within a social and cultural process.

When we unpack the interconnectedness of these “playful integrated pedagogies” (Parker, Thomsen & Berry, 2022, p. 3), we begin to see a complex map, rather than a stand-alone pedagogical approach. Parker and Thomsen (2019) explored the alignment of these playful pedagogies with the definition of play, and found common threads such as how they involved iteration to explore new concepts or ideas, or how they involved interaction with peers to foster socio-emotional learning. These common threads offer hope and possibility, by demonstrating that various aspects of play-based learning are being practiced to some capacity through other curriculum and pedagogical change efforts. This finding is also important because it suggests that schools can avoid “change fatigue” (Dilkes et al., 2014, p. 45) and that educators can start from where they are at in their efforts to ‘play with play,’ rather than propose a completely new learning paradigm that requires significant systemic reform.

## 2.2 Outdoor Play-Based Learning as Critical Pedagogy

For many years I've avoided the term 'pedagogy' for no other reason than I deemed it unnecessary, and a complex term for the average practitioner, particularly seasoned practitioners working in the early years (like me). I've come to appreciate the term after time spent visiting Forest and Nature School programs, as well as an early years department within a municipality, while on a study tour in Denmark several years ago.

While on this tour, I came to learn about an entire professional field within education in Denmark—*social pedagogy*—with the professional title of 'pedagogue'. Although pedagogy is often viewed as a more academic term, according to Pedagogy for Change (n.d), the term 'pedagogy' stems from the Greek terms *país* (child) and *ágō* (to lead, to guide), and a distinct feature of this field is the requirement for authenticity, meaning that the pedagogue is always bringing forth both their personal and professional self while working with children. This sector emphasizes well-being, learning and growth, addressing social inequality, building community and promoting both individuality and collectivity. In Denmark, pedagogues are present in all early learning centers and schools, working alongside educators.

While in Denmark, I was also introduced to the early learning curriculum framework of one municipality and was blown away to learn that the entire curriculum framework was built around the concept of "twinkle in their eye," with the aim that all early childhood educators, parents, pedagogues and children worked together as a team to ensure that all children traveled through their childhood with a twinkle in their eye.

Throughout my teaching experience, pedagogy has been introduced to me, most simply, as the study of teaching and learning, encompassing the view of how one teaches, the content and curriculum that is taught, as well as how a student learns (Breunig, 2016). Simply put, Hussain (2019) defines pedagogy as the art of teaching and this art is built upon learning theories that characterize a set of principles of how individuals acquire, retain and recall knowledge.

Many fear that education itself can be used as a tool for social control, cultural indoctrination, a place for ingraining obedience to authority (Friedman et al., 2016). Within the early and primary years, children are exposed to the “hidden curriculum,” which includes the hidden, inexplicit messages conveyed by the structures, people, content, resources, and so on, that serve to uphold dominant, often oppressive, values, norms, narratives and paradigms believed to serve the interest of the power elite of the school and society (Breunig, 2016).

According to Bialostok (2010), schools are “sites of social and cultural reproduction, designed to create minds and bodies suitable for work in a capitalist economy” (p. 299). The forces of capitalism on education further alienate play. As Hunsinger (2021) explains, play is “enclosed by capitalism and the pursuit of livelihood as required by capitalism. People become serious about things they used to treat playfully. The enclosure of play by capitalism and its transformation into other cultural forms, such as games and sports, is also notable, as that movement is part of what transformed knowledge production into work” (p. 90). Again, we see the dichotomous thread: learning is serious work and play is a non-serious activity that happens outside the realm of education.

Critical pedagogy—that is, the art of practicing critical theory in education—holds numerous educational aims shared by other pedagogies, including working towards a more socially just world (Breunig, 2016, p. 107). An early theorist of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire (1970), rejected the ‘banking model’ of education, which treats educators as depositors of knowledge into students’ rather empty minds, furthered by rote learning, whereby students memorize, and recall based on a process of repetition. Through the early roots of critical theory, Friere suggested the power of both action and reflection as part of the education process (Breunig, 2016, p. 108).

Critical pedagogy involves critically thinking about, negotiating and transforming “the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relation of the wider community and society.” (Breunig, 2016, p. 108). This process involves questioning dominant paradigms, norms and worldviews, as well as embedding into the classroom everyday practices that support the sharing of power, critical thinking, social change and system transformation. The underlying assumption here is that schools either act to perpetuate injustice and dominant worldviews, or they work towards the aim of social and political justice.

Central themes within critical pedagogy include problem-posing practices where dialogue is a predominant pedagogical method, and whereby new relationships between educators and students emerge that suggest and support co-intentionality (Breunig, 2016, p. 115). Glass (2001) builds upon the importance of dialogue, suggesting that it must be participatory, open, critical, and intentional, resulting in knowledge and cultural action for freedom. Other critical pedagogical practices include moving all the chairs



into a circle, suggesting a shift in power and mutuality of relationship; including students in the creation of goals, objectives, and community standards within the classroom; and choosing course materials that represent diverse and multiple sources of knowledge (Breunig, 2016). Here, we see a link between critical pedagogy and broader environmental and outdoor education goals to literally and metaphorically remove the chairs and walls of the classroom altogether.

Glass (2001) asserts that for education to be liberatory, “it must respect the everyday language, understanding, and way of life of the knowers, and it must seek to create situations in which they can more deeply express their own hopes and intentions” (p. 19). Therefore, critical theory involves a process of individual and collective consciousness raising, an awareness of self in the context of the broader world, including the oppressive forces working with and against us. Freire called this a “practice of freedom” and viewed it as a primary aim of the education process (Glass, 2001).

Wehmeyer et al. (2000) assert that “teaching students to take greater control over and responsibility for their own learning and to become causal agents in their lives is a process that often does not lend itself to traditional models of teaching.” (p. 440). On the other hand, according to Horton & Freire (1990), “the more the people become themselves, the better the democracy” (as cited in Glass, 2001, p. 19). Herein lies the greater potential of outdoor play-based learning.

We often find the concepts and common terminology of critical theory applied to the study of play. In fact, the two disciplines’ terms are often used interchangeably: liberation and freedom, self-agency and self-direction (sometimes defined in play as

personally directed/intrinsically motivated/freely chosen), relationships and trust, individualism and collectivism, etc. When we look at play from the lens of critical theory, we can glean insights into effective practices, but we can also come to better understand the pedagogical and historical tensions found in outdoor play-based learning, as well as a potential meandering path forward.

Hunsinger (2021) recognizes that the concepts of play and knowledge are both culturally diverse and culturally universal, arguing that play and knowledge are fundamental aspects of human existence that transcend cultural boundaries. According to Hunsinger (2021), every individual has engaged in play and acquired knowledge within the context of these terms. The opportunity found in outdoor, play-based learning goes beyond developmental and educational benefits. As Hunsinger (2021) states, the critical theory of play situates liberation at its core, because “play is inherently a realm of liberatory escape. It allows us to transgress rules by re-imagining the world differently” (pp. 87-88). Glass (2001) reminds us that “freedom is not a given but is always precarious and must be achieved,” (p. 16) and play allows us to practice this freedom in a way that is both culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate.

Young children use imaginative play to make meaning of the world around them, and to gain emotional, social and cultural competence to handle what life places in front of them daily. According to Shuffleton (2012), “in happier situations, children play out interpersonal conflicts and thereby become able to resolve the real ones; in horrific situations, children have used imaginative play as a means to cope with the terrors around them” (p. 314). For instance, “children at Auschwitz played ‘going to the gas chamber,’ and children in war zones play at war in order to come to terms with their

otherwise psychologically devastating circumstances. Enslaved African American children played out the circumstances of violence, familial separation, and oppression as a means to withstand the reality of slavery.” (Shuffelton, 2012, p. 314).

We can see here that children, through play, are absorbing the hidden curriculum, as well as gaining a cognitive and emotional handle on their worlds, as oppressive or as privileged as they may be. Children learn through these playful experiences the subtle and explicit ways that power and privilege show up, and how colour, language, age, gender, and physical ability differences are connected to that power and privilege (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force, 1989, p. 1). Power and privilege, and the process of dehumanization, can show up in outdoor play-based learning in many ways, and if unchecked or unprocessed can further perpetuate these oppressive narratives and norms. Two examples shown in Derman-Sparks et al.’s (1989) work illustrate this well:

‘Ann can’t play with us. She’s a baby,’ a 3-year-old tells her teacher. Ann, 4 years old, uses a wheelchair.

A 2 1/2-year-old Asian child refuses to hold the hand of a Black classmate. ‘It’s dirty,’ he insists. At home, after bathing, he tells his mother, ‘Now my hair is white because it is clean.’ (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force, 1989, pp. 1-2)

These examples illustrate both the challenge and opportunity for anti-oppression we have through play and highlight the role of the educator to enter the play with an intention to engage the children in a playful “practice of freedom” and dialogue where they ask thought-provoking questions, illustrate examples, pose problems and engage in inquiry, and co-construct a new play narrative that humanizes, rather than dehumanizes

the children engaged in that play. I elaborate further on this concept of *entering the play* in the section on educator intentionality.

### **2.3 An Emerging Current in Environmental Education**

Today, there are misconceptions that nature-based early learning is inherently play-based, and that, likewise, outdoor play-based learning inherently has a focus on the environment and sustainability. In my professional experiences I have seen early years programs that are nature-based, where children have ample exposure to nature and spend significant amounts of time outdoors, yet there is a heavy focus to stay on the trail, and there is very little expression of play across the play continuum, and traditional teaching methodologies that are teacher-led are employed. Likewise, I have seen really great examples of outdoor play-based learning programs that do not instill an environment or sustainability ethos within their programs, exemplified by the overconsumption of unsustainable materials (such as single-use plastics), a lack of recycling or composting, and very little discussion of broader, developmentally appropriate environmental concepts. My observations here are not intended as a critique of either approach, but rather to highlight that outdoor play-based learning is not inherently environmental, nor is a nature-based early learning inherently play-based. Therefore, further clarification on the interconnections between outdoor play-based learning and environmental education is needed.

Situating play in this complex, integrated theoretical landscape is no small feat, yet we find examples of emerging and integrated pedagogies within many sub-sects of education. Within the field of environmental education, this complex mapping of

pedagogies is long underway, and the critical play-based learning pedagogy described above has a home in the theoretical landscape of environmental learning.

One such mapping of pedagogical approaches in environmental education can be found in Sauv e's (2005) exploration of fifteen currents, titled "Currents in environmental education: Mapping a complex and evolving pedagogical field." This influential paper explores the landscape of environmental education from the perspective of fifteen pedagogical currents that have greatly influenced and shaped teaching and learning in the field. Although the analysis is not exhaustive or complete, Sauv e explores each of the fifteen pedagogical currents in five categories: how each current conceives the environment and education; the primary aim or change it seeks; main strategies and approaches that are implemented; examples and models in practice; as well as a brief critical analysis of the pedagogy.

Sauv e (2005) acknowledges that each current reflects the culture of the time, both past and present, and it is this cultural influence, as well as an educator's worldview, that influences the pedagogies they choose. Although there are differences between each current, Sauv e (2005) asserts that there is certainly common ground to be found in a shared concern for the environment and the recognition that education plays a significant role in supporting human-environmental relationships (p. 11). If we were to use this common ground as a distinguishing identifier of environmental education, then certainly outdoor play-based learning would also qualify as a pedagogical current of environmental education.

Alden (2022) acknowledges that within outdoor play pedagogies we can find a range of approaches, from educators who view nature as a *context* for learning to

educators and programs who have well-articulated environmental education and sustainability goals (pp. 9-10). Whether an educator or program articulates an environmental aim can depend on many factors, such as the sociocultural background of the educator, the educator's level of knowledge and comfort regarding the field of environmental education and/or sustainability, as well as extraneous factors such as funding streams and the priorities laid out by funders to have a particular aim that may alter that program to have an expressed and sole environmental purpose. Regardless of the impetus, once an educator takes students outdoors and starts their pedagogical journey implementing outdoor play-based learning, the seeds are then planted for a relationship *with* nature to unfold, and from this ongoing relationship, to form a bond of care.

Current	Conception of Environment	Aims of Environmental Education	Dominant Approaches	Examples of Strategies
Naturalist	Nature	Reconstruct a link with nature.	Sensorial, Cognitive, Affective, Experiential, Creative/Aesthetic	Immersion; interpretation; Sensorial games; Discovery activities.
Conservationist/Resourcist	Resource	Adopt behaviours compatible with conservation. Develop skills related to environmental management.	Cognitive, Pragmatic	Guide or code of behaviours; 3 Rs set of activities; Environmental audit; Conservation project.
Problem-solving	Problem	Develop problem-solving skills: from diagnosis to action.	Cognitive, Pragmatic	Case study: issue analysis; Problem-solving project.
Systemic	System	Develop systemic thinking: analysis and synthesis, toward a global vision. Understand environmental realities in view of enlightened decision-making.	Cognitive	Case study: environmental system analysis; Construction of ecosystem models.
Scientific	Object of study	Acquire knowledge in environmental sciences. Develop skills related to the scientific method.	Cognitive, Experiential	Study of phenomena; Observation; Demonstration; Experimentation; Hypothetico-deductive research activity.
Humanistic/Mesological	Living Milieu	Know and appreciate one's milieu of life; better know oneself in relation to this living milieu. Develop a sense of belonging.	Sensorial, Affective, Cognitive, Experiential, Creative/Aesthetic	Itinerary; Landscape reading; Study of milieu; investigation.
Value-centred	Field of values	Adopt ecocivic behaviours. Develop a system of ethics.	Cognitive, Affective, Moral	Analysis of values; Clarification of values; Criticism of social values.
Holistic	<i>Holos, Gaia, All, The Being</i>	Develop the many dimensions of one's being in interaction with all aspects of the environment. Develop an "organic" understanding of the world and participatory action in and with the environment.	Holistic, Organic, Intuitive, Creative	Free exploration; visualization; Creative workshops; Integration of complementary strategies.

Current	Conception of Environment	Aims of Environmental Education	Dominant Approaches	Examples of Strategies
Bioregionalist	Place of belonging, Community project	Develop competencies in/for local or regional community ecodevelopment.	Cognitive, Affective, Experiential, Pragmatic, Creative	Exploration of our shared milieu; Community project; Project of local or regional ecodevelopment.
Praxic	Locus of action/reflection	Learn in, by, and for environmental action. Develop reflexive skills.	Praxic	Action-research; Reflexive posture in activities or project.
Socially Critical	Object of transformation, Place of emancipation	Deconstruct socio-environmental realities in view of transforming them and transforming people in this process.	Praxic, Reflexive, Dialogic	Analysis of discourses; Case study, Debate, Action-research.
Feminist	Object of solicitude	Integrate feminist values into the human-environment relationship.	Intuitive, Affective, Symbolic, Spiritual, Creative/Aesthetic	Case study, Immersion, Creative workshop, Communication & exchange activity.
Ethnographic	Territory, Place of identity, Nature/culture	Recognize the close link between nature and culture. Clarify one's own cosmology. Valorize the cultural dimension of one's relationship with the environment.	Experiential, intuitive, Affective, Symbolic, Spiritual, Creative/Aesthetic	Fables, Stories and legends; Case study; Immersion; Modelling; Mentoring.
Eco-Education	Role of interaction for personal development, Locus of identity construction	Experience the environment to experience oneself and to develop in and through it. Construct one's relationship with the "other-than-human world".	Experiential, Sensorial, Intuitive, Affective, Symbolic, Creative	Life story; Immersion; Exploration; Games; Introspection; Sensitive listening; Subjective/objective <i>alter-nance</i> .
Sustainable Development/Sustainability	Resource for economic development, Shared resource for sustainable living	Promote economic development that takes care of social equity and ecological sustainability; Contribute to such development.	Pragmatic, Cognitive	Case study; Social marketing; Sustainable consumption activities; Sustainable living management project.

Table 1: Sauv  (2005) Characterization of Fifteen Currents in Environmental Education.

If we were to apply Sauvé's analytical model to outdoor play-based learning as an emerging current of environmental education, perhaps we could define it as follows:

Current	Conception of Environment	Aims of Environmental Education	Dominant Approaches	Examples of Strategies
Outdoor Play-based Learning	Place of belonging, attachment figure, nature exists across a continuum and is everywhere	To co-construct ecological identity through play, build meaningful relationships with self, others and the natural world, and foster an ethic of care, through playful means.	Sensorial, creative, imaginative, dialogic, open-ended, prioritization of freedom balanced with interdependence, child-centered, praxic, intuitive.	Immersion, exploration, introspection, experiential, inquiry-based, shared thinking and experiences.

Table 2: Outdoor Play-based Learning Characterized as an Emerging Current in Environmental Education

Situating outdoor play as a current of environmental education is relatively new. In previous generations, one could argue that outdoor play primarily existed in the realm of leisure time, such as after school and on weekends. Additionally, environmental education offerings were often provided by outdoor education centres off site and away from schools, to older children in grade four and beyond, potentially because bussing and field trips were easier to coordinate in these older grades. With the emergence of nature preschools and forest school programs, how we deliver environmental education and how it reaches the early years has come into question. Our pedagogical approach in providing environmental education in the early years is also called into question, given how play-based learning is considered a best practice for children of this age (between 0-8 years old). Therefore, there can be great value in viewing outdoor play-based learning from the perspective of one-of-many interwoven currents that Sauvé (2005) has identified.

Sauvé (2005) calls us to critically assess the ways in which we evaluate educative approaches:



...various authors (researchers, professors, educators, facilitators, associations, organizations, etc.) adopt widely differing discourses on environmental education, and propose diverse ways of practicing educative activity in this field. Each advocates his or her own vision—we may even identify different pedagogical “chapels,” all distinct proponents of the right approach, the best program, the appropriate method. How can we orient ourselves amid such a diversity of propositions? How can we discern which voice(s) should inspire our own educational initiatives? (p. 11)

Regarding how older pedagogical approaches integrate with the new, Sauvé (2005) warns against throwing the baby out with the bathwater: “The oldest currents are not outmoded: they are rooted in fundamental aspects of human-environment relationships; they have been further enriched over time” (p. 12). Therefore, although discourse, including critiques, is essential and valuable for any emerging theory and pedagogical practice, there is no need to abandon early theory and practice to make room for the new, even if it may be necessary to overwrite some aspects of the old as newer knowledge informs our practice (e.g.: decolonial perspectives may inform us to re-animate colonial practices rooted in older currents). The new currents present themselves to reflect the concerns and conditions of the times, in which case, as the landscape of childhood continues to push play to the margins, this current has value and opportunity and is worthy of being a part of many currents. Indeed, there’s overlap and this new, emerging current shares much with the currents that have come before, perhaps most strongly associated with the Naturalist, Humanistic, Holistic and Socially Critical Currents proposed by Sauvé.

In exploring one's pedagogical orientation and which current to apply to practice, Sauv  (2005) further reminds us that "the merits of each current as a source of inspiration must be gauged both in terms of the particular worldview it promotes and with respect to the unique characteristics of each pedagogical situation (including the objectives pursued and the context of intervention)" (p. 12). Outdoor play-based learning doesn't just reflect the challenges and needs of our time and the marginalization of play and nature from children's lives: it also reflects a historically rooted, developmentally appropriate way in which to support children in the early years to engage with concepts of environmental education.

Our climate crisis is indeed a critical, serious matter, and yet how we engage children and educators in the early years in this crisis is a worthy exploration. Upon entering the school system in junior kindergarten in Ontario, my own child came home frightened by an introduction to new lockdown procedures that were required by the school board to prepare students for dangerous situations, such as a person with a gun, or another person entering the school who was perceived as a threat. From a young child's perspective, this possibility, and the practice, was alarming, although it made great sense from an adult, policy perspective. Likewise, her first introduction to climate change and global warming brought her to tears for many nights on end, worried that the people she loved wouldn't survive. She was four years old, and these abstract concepts were just outside of her realm of understanding and weren't presented in a way that was developmentally and age-appropriate.

By contrast, at the Forest and Nature School, one day (at around the same age) she and her classmates came upon the carcass of a deer that had most likely been eaten

by a coyote the night before. There, they confronted death and consoled one another, they grieved the deer, explored and asked questions about the food chain, played ‘funeral’ and engaged in a form of play that soothed them in the process.

Another day shortly thereafter, in early spring, they noted unseasonably warm weather, and another child introduced her peers to environmental concepts like climate change and global warming. When these conversations came up, they built solar villages and decided to keep the lights off in the cabin, and shared stories of ways that they and their families were trying to be a part of the solution. There was a richness of experience in this latter example that stemmed from and was built on play, rather than an abstract concept that elicited fear.

Niblett et al. (2020) articulate the possibility and hope found through this emerging environmental education current as “one of transformational opportunity,” with the promise of “a more hopeful, inspiring way forward” (p. 69). Through play, the children at the Forest and Nature School could explore the same concepts, death and climate change, but through lived experience. The ideas were no longer abstract. They were right before them, presented as a deceased deer and unseasonable weather. Additionally, through play, the children were empowered to explore their imaginations, the questions that came up, and their feelings about the concepts of death and climate change. They became active agents in these explorations and, through that process, felt like they could more fully comprehend what was happening, and they felt hope in being able to mobilize around the concepts.

### **3. Embedding Outdoor Play-Based Learning into the Early Years**

The tensions and gaps in translating play theory into practice do not just lay at the hands and feet of the educator, nor do they reside in mere skills, knowledge and competency at the practitioner level. The pedagogical and philosophical challenges reflect the systems we live within, which can be simultaneously oppressive and supportive for children, educators and the play process itself. An important area for future research, which falls outside the scope of this thesis, is how our education systems (including relevant policy and legislation) interact with what Parker and Thomsen (2019) call constructivist “playful integrated pedagogies” (Parker, Thomsen & Berry, 2022, p. 3). The lone educator can only get so far if there is political or cultural resistance to change toward supporting these playful integrated pedagogies.

Herein lies a contradiction of sorts. While I am situating outdoor play-based learning through a critical theoretical lens (suggesting that outdoor play is a tool for thinking critically about dominant paradigms, norms and worldviews toward the aim of social and political justice (Breunig, 2016), I’ve come to believe that the answer doesn’t solely lie in political or systems-related change. After spending a decade exploring outdoor play-based learning and being in the research weeds for two years, I believe that ‘effective’ and ‘innovative’ practice also involves looking deeply inward. In other words, play is as personal as it is political (Hanisch, 2006/1970).

The outdoor play-based educator can be first called to outdoor play for many reasons: a longing for freedom themselves after a career inside the classroom; nostalgia for early experiences in nature or missed opportunities in childhood; a desire to bring an

ethic of care for the environment and sustainability principles into their pedagogical practice; a recent separation and divorce that has turned everything on its head, resulting in a willingness to try something new. The list can go on.

In my experience, as I facilitated courses about the Forest and Nature School approach, these scenarios often drove educators to outdoor play. Some, like me, had formative experiences of playing in nature that were calling them outside, while others felt a sense of displacement from the land from traumatic or adverse experiences that impacted their sense of safety. Some educators had previous professional experience in environmental education, but were seeking new approaches for leading children while outdoors, and some had yet to learn why they were there or what they would do with this new learning but were curious and open enough to explore.

Early childhood educators I meet increasingly recognize a gap in their knowledge, skill set and comfort with implementing play-based learning outdoors. They seek to balance the benefits with the risks found outdoors in an environment with more unknowns and harder to regulate. In other words, they express a high comfort level with embedding play-based learning inside, where it is easier to control the environmental factors, but not outside, where the environmental factors are constantly changing. Alden (2022) acknowledges that despite the extensive history of outdoor learning in early childhood education, educators have increasingly prioritized the indoor classroom as the primary environment for children's learning in Canada and many other parts of the world (p. 14).

Regardless of why an educator is called to outdoor play-based learning, the very first step is always *opening the door*—both literally and metaphorically. Adults who

work with children are the gatekeepers to children's play, and until an adult sees the potential and opportunity of outdoor play, children's lives continue to be highly structured and programmed (and institutionalized). In this regard, opening the door is not just the first step—it might also be the most important step.

Renowned speaker, scholar and researcher on the intersections of play and education, Dr. Peter Grey (2013), highlights how play itself is an exercise of restraint, and yet also an engine for cultural innovation. In other words, play is a place where children learn both the social conditions they need to abide by, as well as where they can tap into their imaginations to unlearn and rewrite the scripts that do not serve the needs of childhood nor the aim of a socially just world. Recall, for instance, my earlier anecdote of the children playing climate change and building pretend solar panels. In that playful moment, those children were learning how to organize themselves, engage with one another in socially appropriate ways, and create rules that they then enforced peer-to-peer with little to no adult involvement – all great examples of learning social conditions and exercising restraint. Meanwhile, they are also tapping into their own imaginations, practicing cultural innovation by coming up with their own solutions to what they perceive as worldly and relevant problems, and unlearning a script of their role as a mere child who typically does not hold much power to solve the problems of the world.

Aside from *opening the door* to outdoor play, as educators, where we go from there has limitless potential. In playing with play, the processes of unlearning and reimagining happen simultaneously. Supporting practitioners in their pursuit of play involves much more than traditional professional learning, with the expert imparting

their knowledge and the participant passively gleaning wisdom. In conversations with outdoor play thought leaders from a Quebec organization called Metalude, I have come to see and believe that the mindset, tenets and principles of play involve just as much unlearning as they do knowledge and skill acquisition (Margaret Fraser and Stephanie Watt, personal communication, May 4, 2023).

For instance, if we consider the trust that is required to support outdoor play-based learning, we can see how to foster that trust in our practices with children, but must also consider what gets in the way of building and maintaining that trust. This *unlearning* process requires self-reflection and self-awareness, the willingness to dig into our own stories and history around trust: what impedes it; when we've felt trust in relationships; examples of when an adult trusted us as a child; when our trust was broken; the conditions that support trust-building; and how trust has at times been instantaneous and other times builds gradually over time.

Similarly, when we explore the open-ended, unstructured nature of the outdoor play continuum, we must also consider what gets in the way. For an educator to allow a free-flowing, open-ended experience for children, they must be comfortable sitting in the unknown of what could happen—which requires trust but also comfort with not knowing where a child or group of children will take the play, or the specific outcomes that can flow from a play-based learning experience. There is a process of unlearning our need for control and knowingness, and leaning into the present moment with keen observation skills and an ability to make connections, bringing the learning to the forefront by being a co-conspirator in the play with children, and/or being an interpreter of that play through meaningful dialogue and inquiry.

### 3.1 Outdoor Play-Based Learning Continuum

Five years ago, I was leading an organization whose chosen mandate was to scale outdoor play-based learning across Canada, to mainstream this offering so all children had the opportunity to play on the land, particularly children from equity-seeking groups who would have the greatest chance of being able to participate in outdoor play through funded, licensed, often institutionalized settings. As we took steps in this direction, we were metaphorically stepping off the smaller “pirate ship” we had been on for many years, where we could exist in the nuances of play, intuitively test our ideas around play as an act of liberation, as democracy in action, and as an ongoing practice of freedom with children. Administering our programs in this new landscape meant shifting to the mindset of a much larger organization, with different employment policies and practices from what we were used to. And as we scaled professional learning and saw the Forest and Nature School idea being implemented within larger settings, there were concerns around whether this expansion would ‘water down’ the original concept and intentions we brought to our practice at that smaller scale when we were “pirates”—un-institutionalized rebels in the educational ethos.

Shortly after this period, I stepped away from my work in the Forest and Nature School field, partially due to burnout, but also because as I stepped off the pirate ship, I lamented the many things that would be lost in the growth process, including relationships with my fellow privateers. At the time, I couldn’t reconcile what could be gained from mainstreaming and scaling outdoor play-based learning with what was being lost. As time has passed, and through the writing of this thesis, these fears have been soothed through a deep appreciation for continuums of all kinds: continuums of



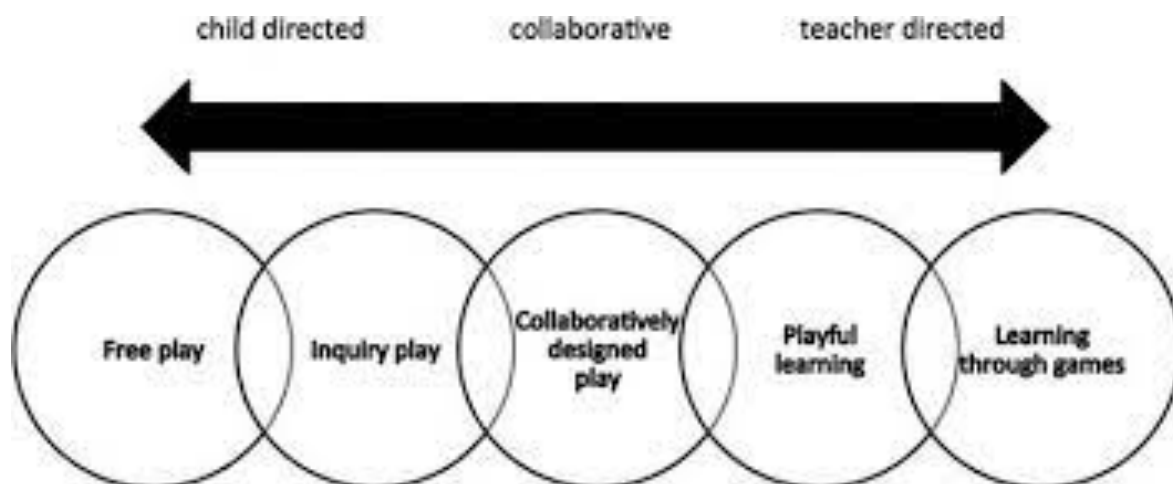
process and experience first and foremost, but related to this, the continuum of outdoor play-based learning.

According to Pyle and Danniels (2017), play in the educational realm is often held to purist standards, placing the locus of control in the hands of children, with little or no interference from the adults who might be present. Several play movements, including my own experiences through Forest and Nature School, constrain the role of the educator to be as minimal as possible, in order “to support, not to disturb” (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006, p. 48) and to avoid contriving or “hijacking” the play (Goouch, 2008, p. 95).

I do believe that there is immense value in this form of unstructured free play for children and that play for the sake of play is enough and has great developmental benefits, particularly socially and emotionally. And when we are exploring play for the sake of learning, I do believe there’s great value in having a more fluid definition of play and expanding the role of the educator.

Pyle & Bigelow (2014) suggests that play, when situated in a learning context, provides children with the opportunity to internalize and explore academic concepts, and the opportunity here for the educator is to be involved as an active participant in furthering this learning. When we explore play along a continuum, the role of the educator can be just that: fluid and ever-changing, ranging from “silent and noninterfering observer to creator of playful contexts designed to promote the learning of specific academic standards” (Pyle and Danniels, 2017, p. 281).

Figure 1. Continuum of Play Based Learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017, p. 283)



Pyle and Danniels (2017) highlight the differences between play-based learning that is child-centred and play-based learning that is merely child-directed. Child-centred play happens along a continuum and creates an opening for play to extend beyond the critical hours (such as after school and weekends) into formalized learning, thereby allowing for a deep and meaningful role for the educator in the play-based learning process. If we narrowly define play-based learning to only include child-directed, free, unstructured play, we limit ourselves and children's opportunities to have deeply embedded play throughout their entire formal educational experience. The potential limitations of a narrowed view of play result from perceived pressures of this purist view of play and from the lack of clarity around the role of the educator from this end of the play-based learning continuum.

When we consider this play-based learning continuum in tandem with the nature continuum, there is great potential to find opportunities for outdoor play-based learning in all formal learning settings. The nature continuum itself offers an expanded view of

the environments where rich learning opportunities can happen, (Niblett et al., 2020), how children view nature, and can increase accessibility for all children, particularly children in urban and low income areas.

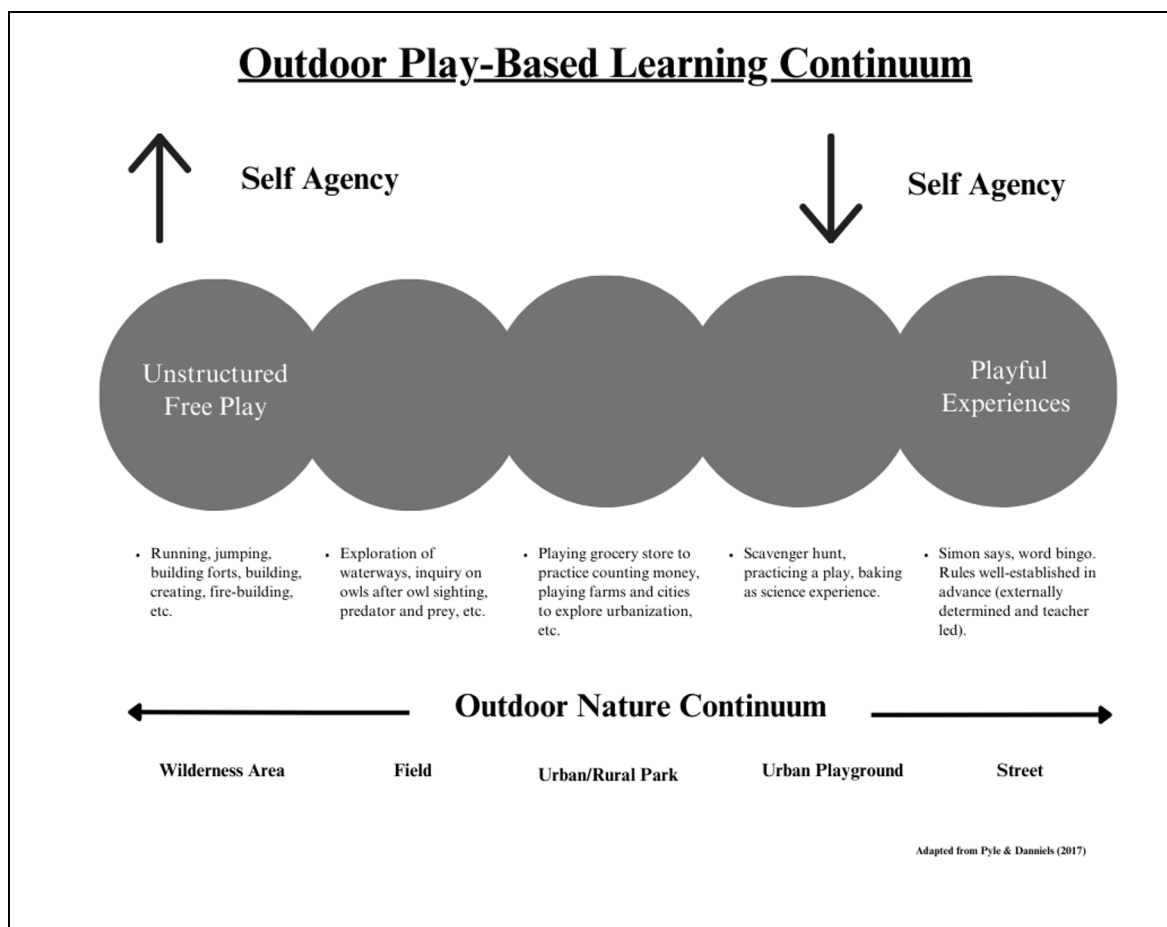


Figure 2. Proposed Outdoor Play-Based Learning Continuum

This new conceptualization of the Outdoor Play-Based Learning Continuum reflects the Pyle & Danniels (2017) Continuum of Play Based Learning, yet simplifies how we define play across the continuum. By removing inquiry play and collaboratively designed play, and inserting playful experiences in lieu of learning through games, I am

suggesting that inquiry, collaboration and games can happen everywhere on the play continuum. For instance, I have seen games emerge daily in unstructured free play, inquiry is often driven by what emerges in the unstructured free play process, and collaboration among children and between educator and child happens in all places along the continuum as well. Likewise, I have removed the term ‘games’ from the continuum because it provides too much leeway for educators to impose their own prescribed activities, games or lesson plans that have predetermined objectives and outcomes while maintaining the label of play, despite limiting self-agency for the children playing. The danger here isn’t that these games, activities, or lesson plans are bad, but merely that this is the current default in our classrooms. As Nxumalo et al. (2018) state, the opportunity in presenting emergent curriculum (play) is to “resist standardized and theme-based curriculum in early childhood education, including increasingly regimented modes of governing what children can do and learn in the classroom” (p. 434).

A key feature along this adapted continuum is the presence of self-agency for children in play, which grows as one moves towards unstructured free play, and decreases as one moves towards playful experiences. Some would say that an educator’s involvement and interactions also change as children move along this play continuum, and there is a general suggestion here that an educator may lean more heavily on observation, reflection and minimal involvement on the unstructured, free play side of this continuum. If I return to my definition of outdoor play-based learning, I believe that the role of the educator along the entire continuum is *to be a co-conspirator in play, as well as an observer, facilitator, interpreter and transformer of the playful experiences.*

The nature continuum in the Outdoor Play Continuum positions multiple outdoor environments as valuable to the play-based learning process, ranging from wilderness settings to the street. As mentioned previously, to a child nature can be one tree in an urban park and immense value can be found in the nearby natural spaces that are closest to where children live and learn. The literature suggests that play's value, also known as play affordances, does vary from one context to another and that more natural settings are often preferred by children because they come with a high degree of diversity of structural elements (dead wood, old trees, mixed trees etc.), as well as spatial diversity (gaps, multilayered surfaces, etc.), which offers more opportunities for freedom and manipulation, as well as a fuller spectrum of play opportunities (Gundersen et al., 2016). There may be some correlation to wild settings eliciting unstructured play, on one end of the play continuum, while the built environment on the other end of the nature continuum may be more prone to elicit play that involves lower levels of self-agency, although I believe further research in this area is needed.

A concept not incorporated into this Outdoor Play-Based Learning Continuum is risk, and how the levels and kinds of risks posed in the different environments interact with and influence self-agency in play. Again, there is a need for further research in this area.

According to Morris (2020), "Kolb's experiential learning cycle is perhaps the most scholarly influential and cited model regarding experiential learning theory. However, a key issue in interpreting Kolb's model concerns a lack of clarity regarding what constitutes a concrete experience, exactly (p. 1064). Although this model has come under scrutiny, in my own career and starting place as an educator, I found it helpful to

have a reference point and potential process to lean into while supporting outdoor education, such as the Earthkeeper's program and the Mentoring in the Outdoors workshop I delivered with Heartwood in Nova Scotia. However, I found this model less useful when I was exploring and embedding play into my practice in the early years.

A question for many educators, reflected in the work of Parker, Thomsen & Berry (2022), is how play intersects with other equally sound pedagogical approaches, such as experiential learning, inquiry, collaborative learning, and place-based education, given the overlap of these approaches. Below is an attempt to explore how play fits into other pedagogical approaches:

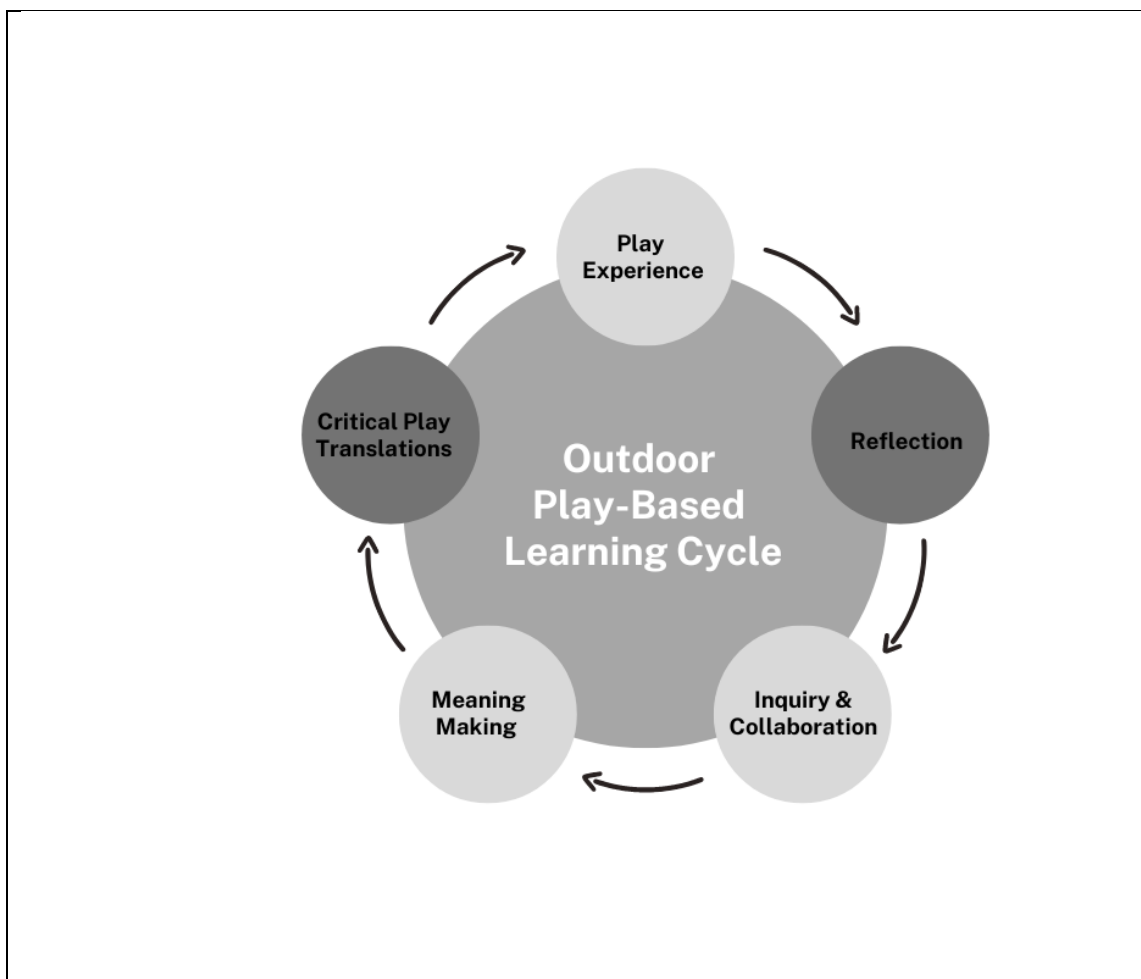


Figure 3: Adapted from Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (Kolb 2015)

Although not tested empirically and still in need of more conceptual theorizing, this characterization reflects how I view play in the service of learning; in other words, whether the play is unfolding as free, unstructured play or on the other end of the play continuum as a playful experience, the role of the educator in this process is to co-conspire in play and then to collaborate with children in their process of reflecting, inquiring, making meaning, and then critically translating this play towards the aim of social and environmental justice. It's important to note that, at times, children and educators may stay in the play experience for a long time and then engage students at an entirely different day or time to work through the remaining learning cycle. It's also important to note that not all parts of this learning cycle happen as a whole group, as play offers opportunities for individual, small groups and entire class experiences. Each child may be working through this learning cycle from a different perspective or a different play experience, and this is where keen observation and reflective skills of the educator enhance these multiple and differing experiences.

### **3.2 Educator Intentionality**

One of the most interesting findings in this research process has been the importance of intentionality: the purposeful and deliberate aims of the educator. According to Alden (2022), this intentionality is consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which theorizes the ways that society and cultural factors interact with children's learning and development. Just as society and culture have an impact on the child's developmental process, the individual intentions, beliefs, attitudes, values,

knowledge, and experiences of the educator have a great influence on outdoor pedagogy (p. 23).

An educator's ability to incorporate outdoor play-based learning into their teaching practice is certainly not just about being taught play theory at the post-secondary level or in a professional learning workshop and then, just like that, they're able to apply this in (or rather outside) their classroom setting. Intentionality implies a degree of self-awareness about what values and principles are underpinning your work, and then the process of how you go about supporting outdoor play in your own setting. According to Alden (2022), "recent discourse emphasizes the importance of educator intentionality in adopting a pedagogical approach, undertaking planning, and making decisions (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2018; Hunter et al., 2020; Leggett & Newman, 2017; Niblett et al., 2020; Tonge et al., 2019; Truscott, 2020; Waller et al., 2010; Zurek et al., 2014)." (p. 43). In other words, intentionality is driven by self-awareness, an understanding of our own stories and how that drives our work as educators.

### **3.2.1 Outdoor Play-Based Learning Principles**

As discussed in previous sections, self-awareness and educator intentionality is critical to the outdoor play-based learning process. There is room in play for unique and diverse expressions, and ever-changing values at an individual and cultural level, and yet there are also recognized universal concepts and principles found in play. As we saw in previous sections, particularly in the discussion of terminology, there is little consensus around how to define play, play-based learning, or other topics related to this subject, such as the aim of education itself. Rather than viewing this lack of consensus in a negative light, we can accept this diversity and approach the work without the



binaries that often alienate play in learning environments. In support of this move towards a continuum and away from binaries, principles at a movement level (constant), and values at the individual level (ever-changing), can serve as guideposts in our process of playing with play.

According to Petrova, Dale & Fulford (2006), values are usually only detected in the workplace when they are in clear conflict. When this conflict occurs, this difference in values is often misunderstood and expressed as opposition, conflict and the perpetuation of a binary. In the case of play, one educator may view play as a tool for liberation, with an overarching educational aim for a just society and world, with an underpinning value for children's rights and freedom. Another educator may view play as a transactional tool to impart knowledge and wisdom, with an overarching educational aim focused more on behaviourism with an underpinning value for authority and upholding of hierarchies so that children learn their place in society. If both educators teach together with this opposing view of play, different aims for education and varying individual values, there can be great tension and conflict in the decision-making and pedagogical process. Likewise, if the former educator is hired to teach at a school where the predominant culture is that of the latter, they may feel uneasy and misaligned.

Here, I define 'principles' as a basis for reasoning (decision-making) and practice, as well as an idea that has a general meaning (Censemaking, n.d.). Principles are foundational guideposts in helping groups to make decisions in a complex, uncertain, and changing world, and are also valuable in a complex sector, such as play, where there is a lack of consensus around core concepts. The following principles

represent the conceptual findings of this research, informed by the literature I have reviewed and integrated with my own experience as a play-based practitioner.

- a) Outdoor play-based learning happens along a continuum of experiences.** Within outdoor play-based learning, children and educators move from unstructured, free play with a high degree of self-agency to playful experiences with lower degrees of self-agency on the other end. There is an equal focus on child-centred play across this continuum, and there is value at all ends of this continuum.
- b) Outdoor play-based learning must be universally accessible, yet socially, culturally and environmentally contextualized.** This means the play will, and should, look subtly or vastly different based on many sociocultural factors, including income, education, social connections, housing, food security, gender, age, cultural/ethnic background, physical or cognitive (dis)ability, and more. “Cross-cultural researchers have observed that children all over the world use whatever scraps of time and material resources they can glean to play. What form that play takes, though, depends heavily on social context” (Shuffelton, 2012, pp. 317-318). Additionally, although our definition of the ‘outdoors’ is vast and includes the built environment (streets, sidewalks, urban parks, etc.), there is growing recognition that children’s access to play varies greatly based on their region, environment, landscape and climate. Climate change, neighbourhood safety, as well as increased real or perceived risks, such as a roaring ocean on the east coast of Canada, or carnivorous wild cats on the west coast of Canada, can all contribute to the kind of play that children engage in as well as their access to the outdoors.

c) **Outdoor play-based learning is a practice of freedom and self-agency.** “At the level of our being human, freedom can never be eliminated from existence, while at the level of our concrete practices, freedom is not a given but is always precarious and must be achieved” (Glass, 2001, p. 16). Play offers children and educators alike the opportunity to express and practice freedom at both an individual and collective level, in a very literal and imaginative sense (as in a group of children spending a day outside the fence of the school grounds building structures and exploring the vastness of space and time) but also metaphorically as it relates to the broader social and political context in which we live. According to Glass (2001) “Freire argues that overcoming the limits of situations is ultimately an educational enterprise that he calls a practice of freedom.” (p. 16).

Wehmeyer et al. (2000) argue that the process of enabling students to become active agents in their learning and take responsibility for their own education is often at odds with traditional teaching models. This suggests that educators need to embrace instructional strategies that prioritize student empowerment and foster self-directed learning. By doing so, students can develop the skills and mindset necessary to become independent learners and take control of their educational journey. From a teaching and learning perspective, outdoor play provides us with an opportunity that goes beyond what can typically unfold inside the classroom. According to Alden (2022), “Educators and researchers hypothesize that the greater freedom of movement and expression afforded children outdoors contributes to children’s increased self-regulation and agency” (pp. 26-27).

Regardless of where you are playing on the outdoor play-based learning continuum, there are ample opportunities to establish freedom and self-agency as a cultural norm and value at a practical level. With freedom and self-agency comes a responsibility to care for the human and non-human world around you, to show respect equally to people around you, to act with integrity and be a person of your word, and to uphold the community standards developed by the class, etc. I have worked with educators who fear that promoting freedom and self-agency will result in a lack of control and disrespect, a culture of individualism and hedonism. When managed correctly, we can guide children to achieve both a heightened sense of self-agency and collective care.

- d) **Outdoor play-based learning is relational.** Relationships formed through play, between children and other children, between educator and child, as well as between children and the natural world, are vital to children's development and learning. In play, children test out and explore these relationships, forming connections and disconnections as they go about their days. For children, all future relationships form from these early play experiences (Shuffelton, 2012).
- e) **Outdoor play-based learning is dialogic.** Ridgway and Quinones (2012) found that it wasn't just the opportunity for play that held educative value, but rather "the complex interactions between the child and the educator" (p. 53). The outdoor play-based educator cannot lean on arbitrary rules to uphold order, nor do they simply sit back and allow children to "take the reins" with little to no attention to the process at hand. All learning in play happens through meaningful and purposeful dialogue. Words hold significant power, from our choice of the words we use to describe

things, to how we phrase our requests and the intonations we use.

When I led a team of educators at the Ottawa Forest and Nature School, we participated in Non-Violent, Compassionate Communication training each year, which we all practiced actively in our programs. The goal of Non-Violent, Compassionate Communication is empathy between parties who are communicating, and there are four components: observation, feelings, needs, and requests (Rosenberg, 2003). It is through the experience of play, and then through meaningful dialogue, inquiry and reflection, that we make meaning of our experience and can fuel the play journey.

- f) Outdoor play-based learning involves experiencing, negotiating and balancing risks.** The risks found in outdoor play-based learning are an integral part of the learning process, and of children’s development, not just a factor to be mitigated or ignored. According to a 2015 Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play in Canada, “access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks— is essential for healthy child development” (Tremblay et al., 2015, p. 6477). Facilitating environments where children can safely take risks that extend their abilities is increasingly being recognized as a role of the education sector (Greenfield, 2003; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2011; Leggett & Newman, 2017).

According to Cevher-Kalburan (2015), “despite the risks in children’s free play, including traffic danger, stranger danger and getting injured, there are many more benefits for children’s holistic development and happiness as well as for adults, the environment and the community” (p. 239). Educators and adults play a role in supporting children to engage in risky play, “an effective approach to risk is

managing it instead of reducing it so that the developmental benefits of risky play can be realized” (Cevher-Kalburan, 2015, p. 239).

- g) Outdoor play-based learning is fuelled by the imagination and is a flowy, messy and imperfect process {aka play IS a dirty word}.** Play is imaginative and “always involves some degree of mental removal of oneself from the immediately present real world” (Gray, 2013, para. 10). Shuffelton (2012), acknowledges that “contemporary research into children’s development has come to a consensus that imagination...makes it possible for us to function in the world, natural and social, and to thrive even in conditions of adversity. Through their imaginative play, children develop the ability to understand the difference between the “world in their heads” and the “world outside” — a matter not as easily resolved as it might seem.” (p. 314).

As the imagination comes to life and is permitted to be in the driver’s seat, play unfolds in a flowy (non-linear), messy and imperfect way. To the adult eye and aesthetic, this can feel disconcerting at times. When we had new educators visit the Ottawa Forest and Nature School, I would take them aside before the day started to warn them through the following speech:

*“Play feels like chaos. It is messy and imperfect, and you’re going to want to stop it and control it, but please don’t. I invite you to sit with the discomfort of that, and instead be an observer of how the play moves from chaos to order, and the beauty that can unfold in the messy and dirty process in front of you today.”*

In summary, principles can be defined as fundamental truths or generalizations that are widely accepted and serve as a basis for reasoning and decision-making. They provide guidance and direction in navigating complex and uncertain situations, particularly in areas where there is a lack of consensus on key concepts, such as the field of play. Principles act as foundational guideposts that help groups and individuals make informed decisions and conduct themselves in a changing and challenging world. They offer a framework for understanding and approaching various issues and can be used as a reference point for decision-making processes. By adhering to principles, individuals and groups can ensure that their actions and choices align with accepted truths and values, promoting consistency and coherence in their decision-making and conduct.

### **3.2.2 Educator Disposition and a Playful Mindset**

As Gray (2013) points out, “play is not always accompanied by smiles and laughter” (paragraph 13). The idea that play is always fun and joyous is far from the truth. In fact, outdoor play provides children and educators with ample opportunities to engage in the full spectrum of human experience. There will be cold fingers, wet boots, bumps and bruises, conflict over who “owns” the log dog, and children who climb too high up on a wobbly tree. There will be laughter, moments of peace, difficult conflict, and tears. But it is this range of experiences that provide the richness and quality of learning and development.

An educator's disposition plays a crucial role in the outdoor pedagogical process. Disposition refers to an individual's prevailing tendencies, mood, and temperament. According to Alden (2022), there are several core dispositions that are essential for educators who engage in outdoor play-based learning. These dispositions include

attunement, flexibility, responsiveness to children and the environment, as well as a genuine interest and enthusiasm for the outdoors. The concept of disposition in education emphasizes the importance of educators' attitudes and behaviours in creating a positive learning environment. Educators with a positive disposition are more likely to foster meaningful connections with their students and create engaging learning experiences. In the context of outdoor education, educators need to possess specific dispositions that enable them to effectively facilitate learning experiences in natural environments.

Attunement is a disposition that involves being sensitive and responsive to the needs and interests of children. Educators who are attuned to their students can tailor their teaching approaches to meet individual needs and create meaningful learning experiences. Flexibility is another crucial disposition for outdoor educators. It involves being adaptable and open to new ideas and approaches, as outdoor learning environments often present unpredictable and ever-changing situations. Responsiveness to children and the environment is a disposition that emphasizes the importance of being attentive and responsive to the unique characteristics of both the children and the natural environment. This disposition enables educators to create learning experiences that are relevant, engaging, and meaningful for the students. Lastly, having a genuine interest and enthusiasm for the outdoors is vital for outdoor educators. This disposition helps educators to inspire and motivate students to explore and appreciate the natural world.

In summary, an educator's disposition significantly influences the effectiveness of outdoor pedagogy. Possessing dispositions such as attunement, flexibility, responsiveness to children and the environment, as well as a genuine interest and



enthusiasm for the outdoors, is essential for educators engaging in outdoor play-based learning. These dispositions enable educators to create engaging and meaningful learning experiences that foster students' connection with nature and promote holistic development.

Additionally, Truscott (2020) identifies educator *spontaneity* as key to developing rich pedagogical experiences. Spontaneity can sometimes be misunderstood as merely something that has been unplanned or impulsive, and while that can sometimes be the case, it is most often reflected as following your intuition or the flow of what's unfolding in front of you in the present moment without restricting yourself to sticking with the plan. There is a nuance here, where the educator is constantly balancing between observation, active attunement and participation, planning the environment (see below for pedagogical framing), while being spontaneous to the process at hand. There is an intentionality required in outdoor play-based learning to allow for, even to plan for, spontaneity to unfold. In an education setting, particularly in the early years where there are competing needs, multiple priorities, documentation requirements, licensing restrictions, and more, the educator must remove barriers that impede on spontaneity, and as we discuss below, spend a significant amount of time setting up and framing play, for this spontaneity to unfold.

Another supportive dispositional characteristic of the outdoor play-based educator is what I call the *playful mindset*. To have a playful mindset is to be unhurried and to feel comfortable moving through the learning process slowly. According to Alden (2022), it is "slowing down and remaining open to the unexpected, educators nurture opportunities for magical moments to unfold" (p.55). As I referenced earlier,

one educator I used to work with would say to a group, “We have a plan, we know where we want to go, but we’re open and in no rush to get there.” A playful mindset means having intentions for the learning process, an anticipated end goal or notion of potential learning outcomes perhaps, but a willingness to deviate from this and move slowly on the play path in front of you.

For educators, having a sense of curiosity and igniting a sense of wonder and awe in children invites the imagination, fuels play and mirrors the internal worlds of the children at play. According to Alden (2022), educators should seek to excite children and ignite their sense of wonder (p. 56). Building on Alden (2022), another characteristic that I have personally found to be essential to supporting outdoor play-based learning is the ability to be reflective, both in the moment of the day-to-day, as well as after the play has ended. In play, there is an opportunity to uncover the learning rather than predetermine it. Keen observation and reflective skills allow the educator to see the value and implications of experiences and support them in finding meaningful ways to extend their insight. This reflectivity also allows educators to observe children and situations without the need to cast blame so that they can walk away from the day asking, *“What worked about today, what can we do differently tomorrow? What were the threads of the curriculum that came out through the play and how can I build upon this tomorrow? Did the elements (cold, wind, rain, etc.), have an impact today on behaviours, feelings or experiences? Is there another way to set up our tarps or flow of the day to avoid exposure to those elements?”*

Finally, it is essential to trust yourself as an educator, to trust the child and to trust that the experience is the greatest gift. A trusting disposition means that an

educator will be able to more easily navigate the social, emotional and physical risks that are inherently present in play.

### 3.2.3 Pedagogical Framing

According to Leggett and Newman (2015), “careful planning and management of the outdoor and indoor environments is an essential component of effective, comprehensive intentional teaching (p. 25). In outdoor play-based learning, on the unstructured side of the play-based learning continuum, there are many changing variables and a high degree of unpredictability. The educator is not leaning heavily in these situations on a predictable lesson plan, nor are they leading an activity that has a clear start, middle, and end with prescribed outcomes. Also, while outdoors, the natural elements shaping the play are constantly changing because of factors such as location, landscape, weather, animal sightings, changing loose parts that are found on site, and the children’s interest that day. Because the classroom is a living entity, the behind-the-scenes work of the educator becomes critical to the depth and quality of play-based learning that can unfold.

This intentional background work by the educator is known as *pedagogical framing*. As educators place their attention on planning, structuring and framing the physical and social environment, they are simultaneously enabling children’s agency and efficacy (Alden, 2022, p. 43).

The following is a non-exhaustive list of pedagogical framing that supports the outdoor play-based learning process:

- Developing and maintaining place-based partnerships with local Indigenous groups/agencies that support a commitment to Truth and Reconciliation.

- Choosing, designing, and maintaining a site that is accessible and provides rich play affordances.
- Planning and ongoing provision of loose parts.
- Actively maintaining principles of duty of care.
- Careful planning of play provocations and potential learning resources.
- Conducting Risk Benefit Assessments, such as the tools provided in the “*Risk-Benefit Assessment for Outdoor Play: A Canadian Toolkit*” (Gill et al., 2019).
- Completing seasonal Ecological Assessments of the land that will be used for play.

### **3.2.4 Pedagogical Interactions**

Bringing intentionality into our teaching goes beyond the planning and framing required for play. In addition to being thoughtful about the background conditions that are conducive to high-quality play, the interactions we have with children matter. According to Zhi Yu Li et al., (2020) pedagogical interaction refers to the act of interacting between educator and child. A core tenet of Vygotsky’s sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), reflected through the lens of pedagogical interactions, is the concept of significant/more knowledgeable others, who can scaffold and extend learning for children. In outdoor play-based learning, educators interact with children in a variety of meaningful ways, and contrary to popular beliefs that educators remain on the outskirts of play, they are instead actively attuned and participating in the learning process through these interactions.

Parker, Thomsen & Berry (2022) found common scaffolding techniques utilized in the playful classroom, including posing open-ended questions; encouraging

knowledge sharing that went beyond a one-way, or even two-way, transactional communication; monitoring conversations and providing hints or guiding questions; coaching; feedback; worked examples; and modelling. Alden (2022) extends this list with further suggestions of drawing attention; encouragement and emotional support; informal conversations; as well as sustained shared thinking. This last suggestion is of great interest to me, as it opens the broader questions:

*What is worthy of our attention here? What is my agenda in this conversation, and is this matching the child's interests in this moment? How am I meeting this child where they're at, in their interest and level of understanding? How can we sit in this idea together, for a while longer? And what does sharing our thinking look like and sound like to this particular child/to me?*

Alden (2022) describes how another effective strategy, modeling, subtly comes to life outdoors, such as an educator stopping to engage their senses after a spring rain, or observing and questioning how a particular feather may have dropped in a specific place in the forest, using colorful language and imagery in developing a story that incorporates personal experiences from the day, or participating in an element of risk in play, such as teetering on the log that hovers over the stream.

Parker, Thomsen & Berry (2022) describe other interactions that are found in the playful classroom, including: framing discussion about prior knowledge at the outset of a new place, topic or idea is introduced; the co-creation of rules with learners (which I have incorporated previously in the Forest and Nature School sector as “community standards”), which allows children to be a part of monitoring, caring for, and maintaining safety in their community; hands-on, experiential opportunities to explore

ideas and materials; and students actively engaged in making smaller and larger decisions about their learning such as how it's performed or when it's completed (p. 5).

Play qualifies as a form of pedagogical interaction, and learning to mirror and reflect a child's interests as they emerge in play is both a talent and an art. Many other examples of meaningful pedagogical interactions include engaging in various art forms with children (such as acting out a play, puppetry, sketching and play, writing a story, etc.). Pedagogical interactions can involve rituals that are formed and shared with children, many of which have a long history in outdoor and experiential education (and within my own experiences in Forest and Nature School), including sharing circles and talking sticks, songs, oral storytelling circles; various rituals formed and shared with children, dynamic risk-benefit assessment, as well as imaginative and interactive forms of documentation and assessment of learning. It's important to note that some of these pedagogical interactions could be perceived as cultural appropriation and, therefore, require cultural sensitivity and additional knowledge, support, and professional learning.

## Conclusion

The title of my research, “Playing with Play,” is intended to suggest many things to the reader. First, that the process of embedding outdoor play-based learning into one’s pedagogical approach is a playful one. It’s not supposed to be perfect, nor is there one way to express this pedagogical approach. There are multiple entry points, continuums of all kinds, and room for all educators to explore what play means to them personally, and then to explore what it can mean for students.

The starting place for outdoor play-based learning is inside—that is, looking within. The next step is to literally and metaphorically open the door. While this process sounds simple, providing rich and radical experiences for children that connect to the broader aim of sustainability and social justice is a complex, iterative, and ongoing commitment on the part of the educator. As Callus (2017) points out, “the use of child-centred pedagogical methods is not enough. To them must be added the process of conscientization, uncovering the connection between one’s situation and the broader social context” (p. 603). In some ways, as an educator I stumbled upon play by accident. In other ways, it’s been there my whole life, a force of healing, an opportunity to shed old skins, a life force for my professional growth, and a thread of hope for my children and the children I have worked with.

This thesis revolves around two research questions: How can we (re)conceptualize outdoor play-based learning in formal education for children aged 0-8, and how can we apply theory to support educators in embedding outdoor playful learning practices? My aim was to re-examine the role of the educator in outdoor play-based learning, especially the role that the educator’s subjectivity plays in the learning

experience, while defining a set of key principles of outdoor play-based learning, with a particular focus on social justice principles that I believe are in alignment with play.

This research applies autobiographical experience and conceptual frameworks to historical and current pedagogical theory, in an anti-oppressive and feminist research orientation that challenges received notions of what “counts” as knowledge (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 6) – much in the same way that play challenges truisms about what constitutes education.

I choose this topic for many reasons. I choose it in part because it is near and dear to me, a life-long passion, but I also choose this topic as a reflection of a sticking point I arrived in my career, where I had burning questions about how the pedagogy of outdoor play-based learning that I had espoused in my previous work was reflected in the literature. Through these prior professional experiences, I wondered whether I had missed the mark anywhere, how I could make sense of the tensions I felt in the sector, where the gaps and tensions were, and how I could avoid them or use them in the future.

Lastly, I had questions regarding the connections between outdoor play and notions of liberation and social justice in education. Anecdotally, the Forest and Nature School movement has received increasing criticism as an inaccessible model of early learning for the privileged due to the costs and the fact that most programs are currently private and unlicensed, and offered on a part-time basis that many marginalized families are unable to accommodate. Given that the early learning sector in Canada is primarily comprised of women who have lower income and are members of low-income families, with 29.6% identified as a part of a visible minority group (Choi, 2022, p. 2), this last consideration is a significant one.



This research contributes to and builds upon the existing literature regarding the value of outdoor play-based learning in the early years, and the rising questions around approach and application. It addresses the emerging tensions and gaps, while also attempting to build upon the strengths and momentum across Canada. There continues to be a gap in the literature around how outdoor play-based learning reflects social justice and sustainability principles, as well as quality markers for pedagogy and praxis. Although a deep dive into this aspect of outdoor play-based learning falls outside the scope of this research, I highlight its importance by explicitly naming it throughout the thesis.

Even the best-laid plans face limitations. One such limitation encountered by this conceptual thesis is the lack of empirical data, which may occasionally challenge the validity of my assertions. Additionally, I take as a basic premise the inherent value of educator positionality and intentionality; in other words, that situating yourself in your praxis as an outdoor play-based educator is a best practice. Some might argue that the role of self is in fact a bias or limitation and could obscure the validity of the findings.

Future recommendations for research are limitless, and the following research could add value to this conceptual thesis: How does educator positionality and intentionality impact pedagogy and praxis in outdoor play-based learning? What are the intersections and divergences of outdoor play-based learning as a new current of environmental education? How might risk in children's play impact opportunities for children's self-agency in their learning process? How might Kolb's experiential learning model be adapted to reflect pedagogical practices and the realities of play inside and outside the classroom? And lastly, what are educator responses to the outdoor play-

based learning continuum and how might it impact our understanding of the educator role in outdoor play-base learning?

In conclusion, through situating outdoor play-based learning within the theoretical landscape, understanding outdoor play-based learning as an emerging current of environmental education, defining a set of core principles for outdoor play-based learning, and re-examining the role of the educator, my hope is to offer insight into and hopefulness about the possibilities play brings to the early learning context.

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