

2024 Premier’s Early Childhood Education Scholarship

Reimagining the role of play in early childhood education and care

A cross-cultural examination of Suzanne Axelsson’s ‘Original Learning Approach’ for the Australian context

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# Introduction

*“Play is as important as oxygen, nutrition and love”*

Bob Hughes, playworker and author, 2021 (cited by Wilson, 2024, p. 138)

The Original Learning Approach (OLA) is an authentic pedagogical reflective tool by Suzanne Axelsson, a pedagogical consultant, author, and educator from Sweden. At the heart of the OLA is the vitality of play and its synergy with learning and teaching. Furthermore, Original Learning emphasises the need for educators to become ‘play-responsive’ to meet the diverse needs of all children. The OLA is visually represented as a loom with the warp (vertical) threads symbolising play, and intersecting weft (horizontal) threads representing aspects of learning and teaching. The ten essential learning and teaching threads – wonder, curiosity, joy, imagination, knowledge, interaction, risk, time, reflection, and listening – help weave the rich fabric of children’s learning experiences.

This research report provides a cross-cultural examination of the OLA for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Australia. While linearly organised, fundamental interweaving aspects of the OLA are compared to Australia’s curriculum framework - Belonging, Being, and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Version 2) [EYLFV2.0] (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022). Aligning with the reflective nature of Original Learning, memoirs from my experiences on a study tour and invitations for critical reflection provide implications for alternative practices. This research report hopes to not only contribute to the ongoing discourse concerning quality in ECEC in Australia, but also, one’s personal “discourse of meaning making” - to unearth the ‘why’ and shift towards transformation (AGDE, 2022; Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 2013, P. 92).

# Focus of Study

This research aimed to feature the influential role of Original Learning in contesting dominant discourses in ECEC. To achieve this, a cross-cultural examination was designed to compare the OLA with the EYLFV2.0, which guides educators in delivering quality education and care for children in Australia (AGDE, 2022). By examining similarities and differences, new insights may be uncovered or existing perspectives reinforced. Furthermore, potential implications were explored through an organised study tour to the United Kingdom and Sweden consisting of on-site visits to preschools, adventure playgrounds, and an atelier; in-person interviews; the collection of both digital and physical data; and engagement with relevant literature and blogs.

# Significant Learning

### Defining the ‘play’ phenomena:

*“The right to play is a child’s first claim on the community. Play is nature’s training for life. No community can infringe that right without doing deep and enduring harm to the minds and bodies of its citizens”*

David Lloyd George, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (1916-1922), 1925 (Hewes, 2007, as cited in Ozanne & Ozanne, 2011, p. 264)

The concept of ‘play’ has no one-size-fits-all definition and its complexity is subject to extensive debate. As humans, we are hardwired to play, and its importance for children’s learning, development and well-being is substantially documented. Play is recognised as a fundamental right for children, as per Article 31 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Yet, despite being widely regarded as the hallmark of childhood and a central concept that underpins ECEC in Australia, identifying what constitutes play is challenging (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Fleer (2013, p. 25) illuminates this complexity, describing it as a “cultural expression” as it is interpreted in many ways and through multiple perspectives.

Throughout research and literature, play is primarily classified by characteristics, often from biological, evolutionary, or behavioural perspectives with a focus on developmental functions and play types (Colliver & Doel-Mackaway, 2021; Gray, 2017; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Jarvis, Brock & Brown, 2013; Fleer, 2013). In the EYLFV2.0, ‘play’ is a newly added term to the glossary, broadly coining it as: “…fundamental to the healthy development and wellbeing of individuals and communities. It is often defined by a range of characteristics including freely chosen, self-directed, pleasurable, meaningful, symbolic and intrinsically motivating” (AGDE, 2022, p. 67).

In comparison, Original Learning identifies two characteristics – choice and joy (Axelsson, 2023). These meticulously chosen characteristics are grounded in the understanding that:

1. Play stimulates neuro-connectivity in the brain and is a natural process for learning and making sense of our complex world.
2. Play extends beyond neurotypical and dominant cultural assumptions.
3. Freedom and choice are indispensable characteristics of children’s civic right to play.
4. Play is not only actions but invokes a feeling as children can enter a flow state.
5. Play is a joyful and meaningful experience essential for children’s spiritual well-being (spiritual entails harmony, a sense of belonging, and respect for and with the natural world).
6. Play is not limited to the individual and includes rich social dynamics.

The OLA holds a strong belief that play “originates and belongs with children”, and therefore, must remain unadulterated by external agendas - meaning controlled, interrupted, manipulated, halted, and/ or (over)scheduled (Axelsson, 2023; Wilson, 2024, p. 1). This is reminiscent of the Playwork approach, a significant influence on the foundations of Original Learning. Piloted by a set of guiding principles, Playwork is regarded as the specific act of affecting the whole environment with the intentionality of improving play conditions. In the United Kingdom, I visited various Playwork provisions (an exhibition and three adventure playgrounds), to better understand how Original Learning defines what is ‘play’ and what is ‘non-play’ through the notion of ‘adulteration’. As witnessed, in play ecosystems playworkers adopt an unobtrusive presence, ever prepared with resources or available to support children when needed, whilst remaining alert to hazards. For instance, while visiting ‘The Land’ adventure playground, the resident playworkers were stabilising children’s constructed cubbyhouses. This was completed before opening to ensure they did not interfere with the children’s play processes that are deemed to be freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated (Wilson, 2009).

(Critical) reflective invitations:

1. Solely or with colleagues, create a concept map of the word ‘play’ by answering the following questions:
   * Reflecting on your childhood memories, what characteristics make up the essential childhood experience for you? Do your memories include others? Including adults? How do your lived stories, culture, and capabilities influence these?
   * What do you consider is ‘play’ and what is ‘non-play’?
   * Do you believe all play is purposeful? Why? Why not?
2. When describing the bedrock principle ‘being’, the EYLFV2.0 states: “Childhood is a time to be, to seek and make meaning of the world… [It is] not solely preparation for the future but also about children being in the here and now”. With colleagues, discuss what you think this passage means for ECEC contexts and how it translates into practice (AGDE, 2022, p. 6).

### (Re)defining the notion of ‘autonomy’:

*“Play is the language of autonomy”*

Suzanne Axelsson (2024a, para. 3)

As a construction, ECEC in Australia is dominated by a prevailing neoliberal discourse. The prevalence of performativity means educators must produce ‘good’ students through rigorous assessment against stage-related attainment outcomes (Clark, 2023, Biesta, 2022). Increased transmissive instruction as well as regulated or pre-determined activities in ECEC programs imply that children develop as autonomous individuals (Clark, 2023, Vandenbroeck, 2020, Olusoga, 2013). These activities are often falsely hidden under the guise of ‘play-based learning’ or ‘learning through play’ and as Axelsson (2023, p. 34) aptly writes “children are not given the permission to play that they have the right to”. Salamon, Gibbs, & Cooke (2024) write that ECEC in Australia is founded on rights-based philosophies that aim to stage social justice, democratic communities, participation, and agency of societies’ youngest citizens. If children are truly positioned as “full citizens [and] active social agents capable of engaging in and influencing decision making processes in their own lives”, then the characteristics of choice and autonomy are essential for any experience to be considered ‘play’ (Colliver & Doel-Mackaway, 2021, p. 568).

The EYLFV2.0 positions play as a teaching tool, stating it is a “context (a place or space where children play) and a process (a way of learning and teaching)” (AGDE, 2022, p. 21). Play-based learning is how educators interpret and direct children’s play through the roles they take and the way they purposefully plan the play-ecosystem and program, including the environments, materials, pedagogies, and attitudes (AGDE, 2022). However, the OLA elucidates that the complexity of these contexts, educators’ ethics, and programmatic instruction agendas create tension how play is observed, interpreted, and permitted.

Original Learning introduces the term ‘autonomous play’ to distinguish between ‘play’ and ‘play-based learning’. Identified by the characteristics of choice and joy, autonomous play is when “children plan, engage in, and monitor their own play” and is grounded in the principle that making decisions over one’s own life and actions comes with the responsibility that this does not diminish others autonomy (Axelsson, 2023, p. 3). Here, the notion of autonomy shifts from the individual to collective interdependence. This encapsulates Axelsson’s term “mwe” (a blend of ‘me’ and ‘we’), which is where children experience a sense of value, belonging, and participation in the designs of the political, social, and cultural structures that shape their lives and the lives of others (Axelsson, 2023, p. 11). I found from my study tour that to begin supporting children’s autonomous play is two-fold. Firstly, by safeguarding the autonomy of all children within play-ecosystems through the role of the ‘playworker’, as discussed in a subsequent section; and secondly, by creating conditions where democratic practices and children’s civic learning and actions are valued.

In the Lerum municipality, Sweden, the preschools have created a community of practice that honour children’s active participation and citizenship. Tredje Rummet, or the ‘Third Room’ is a communal space where children and educators playfully encounter open-ended recycled materials to explore, investigate, and theorise. It is an approach that gives some shape to who children become in and with the world (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2024; Biesta, 2022). Led by resident atilerista Linda Linder, relationality is developed between materials and children’s lives – evoking memories, narrating stories, inviting actions, and communicating ideas. These experiences are nurtured into projects that focus on the themes of sustainability, democracy, and justice. In dialogue with Linder, she referenced the importance of autonomous play for developing children’s connection with materials, as well as the essence of mwe in empowering children to develop their “critical imagination” and become activists for the now and beyond (Sumsion, 2006, p. 4 as cited in Jones, 2016, p. 170). This further requires educators to step back and down from their adult positions to level alongside children.

(Critical) reflective invitations:

1. With colleagues, discuss the following questions:
   * How do you distinguish between ‘play’ and ‘play-based learning’?
   * Consider the children’s daily rhythm in your context, do they have enough access to autonomous play?
   * In your context, how are children positioned as active social participants?

### A ‘play-responsive’ pedagogy:

*“Children’s immersion in their play illustrates how play enables them to simply enjoy being”*

EYLFV2.0 (AGDE, 2022, p. 21)

Original Learning brings alive the diverse rhythms of children’s play through a play-responsive pedagogy. This pedagogy contests educators to (re)think about play beyond normative assumptions and deconstruct the play ecosystem to unveil children’s needs. Understanding the complexity of play is important as this informs educators’ pedagogy and responsiveness to create inclusive experiences and environments. It also invites educators to consider the link between autonomous play, the ten essential learning and teaching threads, and their intentionality.

Play-based learning is a central practice of ECEC in Australia, recognising the intentional roles educators take to support children’s learning, development, and well-being. Although, as aforementioned, issues arise when play is used as a teaching tool, and as Axelsson (2023, p. 12) contends “play cannot be used for teaching”. Here, autonomous play is risked being no longer recognisable by the characteristics of choice and joy (Axelsson, 2023). Rather, a play-responsive pedagogy, advocates that educators become ‘play literate’. Axelsson(2024b) co-defined this with playworker Penny Wilson as:

“Our ability to read, interpret, sense, and understand the essence of play; and an ability to communicate in a common language about play. It is a set of skills and knowledge needed to recognise play, know when to interact and intervene, and how to avoid interference. It is the ability to evaluate and analyse play in order to provide credible and meaningful information about it to others, and to be able to design and sustain an environment in which play is given time, space and validation. It is also recognising that the essence of play can, and should, be found in everyday experiences” (para. 16).

Foregrounded in the OLA, a critical aspect of being play literate is recognising that when children engage in autonomous play, they can enter a state of flow. This is a deeply immersive state where individuals are completely absorbed in an activity, to the extent that everything else fades (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Similarly, when describing deep and purposeful play, Hanscom (2016) recognises that children require around 45 minutes to enter this state. Original Learning perceives play as not merely actions, but also a feeling, emphasising the human brain’s neuro-connectivity when in a play flow. This is when the brain is rewarding the body by releasing endorphins urging the continuation to engage with the world (Axelsson, 2023). In a play-responsive pedagogy, educators weave the ten essential learning and teaching threads into play ecosystems and experiences to intentionally be closer to children in a play flow, thus transforming it into a learning flow (Axelsson, 2023).

On my study tour, I visited Smörblommans förskola in Lerum, Sweden. I observed how it was thoughtfully designed by the resident educators who are play-responsive and attuned to children’s flow. A standout feature was the ‘project room’ for the 4-5 aged children. In this room, children are afforded and permitted multiple opportunities to immerse themselves in open-ended recycled materials. I witnessed children autonomously encountering natural and processed materials with various forms of documentation and provocations inspiring them. In these conditions, the children entered a play flow, then later a learning flow, as they engaged in numerous self-directed learning opportunities as individuals and collaborators. The supporting educator seamlessly moved between the ‘playworker’ and ‘facilitator’ roles (as discussed below) – to be available when needed, observe, change environmental conditions, and support children’s autonomous play.

(Critical) reflective invitations:

1. Can you create a ‘yes space’ for the children in your context? (A space where children have the autonomy to explore, create, and play independently with a range of open-ended materials). Why would or wouldn’t it work?

### The intentional roles of educators:

*“Their play will likely come to life in ways that are unfamiliar – and at times uncomfortable – to adults”*

Mariana Souto-Manning (2017, p. 786)

The EYLFV2.0 draws together different ways of operating under a single curriculum framework. ‘Intentionality’ is a newly adapted practice, which considers educators to be “thoughtful and purposeful in actions and making decisions” (AGDE, 2022, p. 66). Yet, without commensurate discussion this remains misguiding. The OLA sheds light on this matter, identifying three roles’ educators embody – the ‘playworker’, the ‘educator’ and the ‘teacher’. Each role is unique in approach yet requires changeability in transitioning between them to effortlessly align with children’s play flow (Axelsson, 2024b).

The role of the playworker is to protect, observe, and support all children’s autonomy and play. As a playworker, the pedagogical lens of play is uprooted to ensure the unfolding complexity of children’s play is observed. Described as a “benign presence”, the playworker avoids adulterating children’s play, rather creating inclusive and supportive environments conducive to self-directed play, while assessing for hazards and providing necessary assistance (Axelsson, 2024b; Wilson, 2024, p. 48). In dialogue, playworker Sion Edwards from The Venture Integrated Children’s Centre described this as an objective approach, referencing that the playworkers observe the play ecosystem using the ‘Sherlock Homes Approach’. This consists of three steps:

1. *“See: What do you see happening?*
2. *Observe: What do you notice that is different?*
3. *Deduce: What does this imply?”* (Axelsson, 2023, p. 256)

The facilitator’s role is to support children’s play and learning experiences, encouraging their development in autonomous play and their capacity to make informed decisions (Axelsson, 2023). With children, the facilitator remains attuned to how they engage and express themselves freely during play. The facilitator then scaffolds children’s ability to make choices, participate, and express openly themselves. Additionally, the facilitator intentionally designs play ecosystems that support children’s growth. For instance, during a visit to Sommarängs förskola in Södertälje, Sweden, the room for children aged 0-1 was purposefully designed to provide opportunities for educators to act as facilitators, to engage with children in order to scaffold their relationship-building.

The role of the teacher goes beyond generic understandings of ‘teaching’. The teacher recognises that the time interacting with children should be purpose-driven and concise (Axelsson, 2024b). They provide play-responsive interactions and experiences for children to access new knowledge, practice important skills, and explore ideas while nurturing the conditions of a safe play-ecosystem, which draws from the ten essential learning and teaching threads. This role was exemplified by Elisabeth Tsirampidou, the pedagogista at KreMima and Haninge’s children’s studios, located at the Rudan Centre, Stockholm, Sweden. Elisabeth’s literacy-focused work is used within the various ateliers, which incorporate the exploration of nature through the lens of digital technology.

(Critical) reflective invitations:

1. Either as an individual, or with colleagues, unpack the daily rhythm of educators. Where do these roles sit within this? Is there an adequate balance for children?

# Conclusion

*“Through play we become human”*

Arthur Battram, 2000 (cited by Wilson, 2009, p. 3)

This research report presents new insights for, and challenges norms in ECEC in Australia. Critical reflection, described as a "meaning-making process" requires deeper levels of thought and evaluation (AGDE, 2022, p. 18). The OLA serves as a powerful pedagogical tool, encouraging us to reframe our perspectives, explore alternative narratives, and question dominant discourses. One of the OLA’s key strengths is its adaptability across diverse contexts.

The emphasis on 'play' as central to ECEC pedagogy and practice is clear; and play is more than just an activity—it is a vital part of life. While this report lays a strong foundation by focusing on core aspects, the boundless nature of the OLA further empowers educators in their reflective journeys. Areas for further exploration might include examining the relationship between children’s creativity and the permission they are granted, as well as understanding play flow beyond Western constructs. These alternative narratives hold the potential to inspire transformative pedagogical decisions and actions that honour children and their right to play. Perhaps, most importantly, Original Learning illustrates that the foundational concepts underpinning our educational systems are not fixed and universal, and choice is always possible.

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