# Portrayals of Play-Based Learning
## Misalignments among Public Discourse, Classroom Realities, and Research

Angela Pyle, Martin A. Pyle,
Jessica Prioletta, and Betül Alaca

Policy makers around the world increasingly mandate play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms, a pedagogical approach backed by research espousing not only the developmental appropriateness of play-based learning for this age group but also the benefits to students' academic achievement. Despite these mandates, researchers continue to see a discrepancy between policy and practice. Using the lens of institutional theory, the authors reviewed the issue and discovered that, although free play seems ubiquitous, teacher involvement in play—often fundamental for academic learning—fails to occur in approximately half of the classrooms studied. The researchers found evidence of an entrenched and limited definition of play as being child directed, a definition perpetuated by media depictions. These findings have direct implications for teaching practice, suggesting a need to develop a broader understanding of play-based learning and its role in classrooms for media outlets and the stakeholders they influence.
**Key words**: institutional theory; media and education; play-based learning; teacher perceptions; teacher practice

Children's environments, from an early age, often shape their understanding of play as fun. At home, parents might reward their children with time to play after they finish their chores, subtly emphasizing the dichotomy of play and work, situating play as the antithesis of work. At school, similar perpetuations of the difference between play and work can be observed at recess, during which a time of play provides a break from the more rigorous academic learning of the classroom. Kindergarten programs traditionally emphasize the inclusion of free play in the curriculum because of its vital role in children's social development (Russell 2011; Lynch 2015). More recently, however, research demonstrates the value of other forms of play, in which teachers actively include academic learning—incorporating both literacy and numeracy acquisition (Ginsburg 2006; Myck-Wayne 2010; Riek 2014; Smith and Pellegrini 2013; Weisberg, Hirsh-



*American Journal of Play*, volume 13, number 1 © The Strong
Contact Angela Pyle at angela.pyle@utoronto.ca

Pasek, and Golinkoff 2013). At the core of this research lies a more nuanced perspective that considers the level of teacher involvement in play (Pyle and Danniels 2017).

For a long time, the term "play" was synonymous with free play, in which students engage with one another in creative, imaginative, and voluntary interactions. Teacher involvement in play, however, can substantively change the nature of that play and foster academic learning (Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017; McInnes 2019). These positive outcomes, coupled with the developmental appropriateness of play, support the use over the last decade of play-based pedagogies and the promotion of play in kindergarten on a global scale (Baker 2014; Kim 2004; Ling-Yin 2006; Lynch 2014; Pan and Li 2012; Synodi 2010; Tafa 2008).

Despite the research evidence of student benefits and policy mandates for incorporating play-based pedagogies, the teaching approaches of kindergarten teachers vary to a large degree when it comes to integrating play-based pedagogies in their classrooms. These discrepancies are not yet well understood in the extant literature and merit further inquiry. In particular, the research presented in this article considers the role of the term "play" itself and of potential misperceptions of play-based pedagogies. Play-based pedagogies expressly include varying levels of teacher involvement and, thus, are distinct from free play. Yet even researchers who acknowledge this difference often use the generic term "play" to include all forms, which muddles the nuance. For example, although acknowledging the existence of both free and guided play, Lynch (2015) declares expressly that "unless I state otherwise, I refer to all play that occurs during kindergarten class time collectively as 'play' throughout" (347–48). Such an approach may be simpler, but it masks an important distinction and can lead to misunderstanding and confusion, impeding the evolution of the commonly accepted meaning of play to include teacher involvement. In short, there is a possibility that multiple interpretations of play among stakeholders may contribute to the inconsistent adoption of play-based pedagogies and the rise of teacher-perceived barriers.

Therefore, we examine the alignment (or lack thereof) between societal and teacher perceptions of both play and play-based learning with the research and policy recommendations that potentially influence the adoption of play-based pedagogies. We pursue this question using an institutional-theory lens and framework to situate and analyze the relevant media articles from the past ten years as a proxy for public discourse and understanding in combination with data gathered through interviews and surveys of 101 kindergarten teachers.

## Play and Play-Based Learning

Most people agree that kindergarten serves a vital role in preparing students for the rigors of academic learning in later grades, but debates over the nature of that preparation are more than a century old (Cuban 1992). Broadly speaking, in kindergarten, children learn and improve fundamental skills—such as self-regulation and social and emotional development—that prepare them for the institutionalized nature of the education system while also engaging in academic learning (Graue 2010). The two perspectives, guided by developmental and academic logics respectively, are not incommensurate, but balancing the two logics elicits tensions pertaining to pedagogy and best practices (Pyle and Danniels 2017; Russell 2011). Globally, there is an increasing emphasis on the academic side of kindergarten (Baker 2014; Li 2004) but also a drive to promote play in the classroom (Kim 2004; Ling-Yin 2006; Lynch 2014; Pan and Li 2012; Synodi 2010; Tafa 2008). The duality of these mandates suggests that teachers must find a way to facilitate academic learning through play (Wallerstedt and Pramling 2012), primarily because play is a developmentally appropriate context for this age group.

The proposed benefits of play, in the context of education, often fall into two categories: developmental learning (e.g., social and emotional skills, and self-regulation) and academic learning (e.g., literacy and numeracy). These benefits, though, are highly contingent on the type of play and, more specifically, the role of the teacher in the play contexts (Pyle and Danniels 2017). Free play anchors one end of the play-based learning continuum, where play is voluntary, flexible, and internally motivated by the child (Holt et al. 2015; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff 2013). In free play, children may engage in a variety of activities chosen and directed by themselves without active guidance from educators (Wood and Attfield 2005). This form of play, in school yards and in homes, is likely the most familiar to parents and educators alike, the kind of play perhaps most salient for discussions of play and education (McInnes 2019). In an educational context, however, this is not the sole type of play. As Pyle and Danniels (2017) highlight, teachers can be involved in play with varying degrees of control—from collaborator to director.

Developmentally, free play benefits children's progress and growth across the physical, language, social, emotional, and cognitive developmental domains (Pramling, Samuelsson, and Johansson 2006; Pyle and Danniels 2017). During free play, children practice using their fine and gross motor muscles as they

move their bodies and manipulate various objects within the play environment, nurturing the development of physical coordination and growth (Smith and Pellegrini 2013). Through interactions with peers, children also practice sharing and taking turns, which are important components of their social development (Tal et al. 2008). Moreover, pretend play supports children's development of self-regulation skills (Berk and Meyers 2013). In pretend play, children practice more advanced language skills as they take on roles and negotiate play themes and directions (Weisberg, Hirsch-Pasek, and Golinkoff 2013). It also supports children's perspective-taking abilities, fostering abstract thinking that may facilitate the development of higher-level cognition (Bergen 2002).

Teacher-involved play can benefit children's academic learning (Myck-Wayne 2010; Riek 2014) when the teacher takes on an active role in the play context (Pyle, DeLuca, and Daniels 2017). With teacher involvement, play can support the development of early mathematical skills and facilitate everyday mathematics among young children (Ginsburg 2006). In guided play, children may not only spontaneously use mathematics but also work through foundational mathematical concepts and develop mathematical strategies. Similarly, teacher-involved play can also help develop children's early literacy skills (Smith and Pellegrini 2013; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff 2013). For example, children acquire representational abilities through teacher-involved play that may transfer to other symbolic forms (Christie and Roskos 2013). This process lays the foundation for understanding written symbols, supporting children's development of preliteracy skills.

While academic skills may emerge as part of free play, such occurrences are often incidental. Teacher involvement in play is a requisite for consistent academic development (Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017; McInnes 2019). This broader view of play provides the foundation of play-based pedagogies. Play-based learning is a teaching approach that incorporates all of these types of play, with the teacher guiding and scaffolding the learning objectives in an integrated fashion (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff 2013). This nuance is particularly important: play-based pedagogy incorporates teacher involvement in play; it is not simply the use of free play in conjunction with explicit instruction. Despite the benefits stemming from—and mandates for—play-based pedagogies, implementation and integration of play in the classroom continues to vary dramatically (Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017).

Research indicates that teachers who do not successfully implement play-based pedagogies highlight several barriers that impede their ability to do so.

Parental pressures (Fung and Cheng 2012) and demands from colleagues teaching in the upper grades (Baker 2014; Leggett and Ford 2013) to prepare students for later grades implicitly suggest a dichotomous stakeholder perception between play and learning. Some stakeholders (e.g., parents and teachers in upper grades) equate academic preparation with explicit instruction. Concurrently, many teachers face high teacher-child ratios (Lynch 2014; Martlew, Stephen, and Ellis 2011) that, in turn, correspond to a lack of time, materials, and classroom space (Hegde and Cassidy 2009; Rogers and Evans 2007). By expressing these general constraints as impediments, teachers reveal their belief that play is separate from learning, something that they should squeeze in if time allows. Finally, teachers commonly cite a lack of training and professional development in using play-based learning strategies (Howard 2010; Pui-Wah and Stimpson 2004). On the surface, this may simply be a case of teachers needing additional support to learn best practices for involving themselves in students' play and linking this to learning assessment, but it may also reveal the retention of a narrow definition of play and the difficulty correcting a definitional misalignment between play (as free play) and play-based pedagogy (McInnes 2019).

Though certainly valid, these perceptions do not necessarily align with the research. Investigations of play-based pedagogies often find teachers who successfully integrate play-based strategies in the same school boards and, at times, teaching at the same schools as those who struggle to integrate such strategies (Pyle and Danniels 2017). In other words, findings show that the former are able to incorporate play-based pedagogies with comparable parent demographics, access to resources, and professional development as the latter. Thus, we suggest that the underlying reasons for the variation in integrating play-based pedagogies are not well understood. By examining play perspectives through the lens of institutional logics and theory, contextualizing play in light of the ongoing shifts in kindergarten research and practice, we present a theoretical rationale indicating that, rather than constituting insurmountable barriers, these teacher perceptions of play's role in learning are symptomatic of a more deeply rooted issue.

## Kindergarten: An Institutional Theory Perspective

Researchers frequently apply institutional theory to explore and understand education systems as a whole (Fusarelli 2002; Hallet 2010; Hanson 2001) and

kindergarten in particular (Russell 2011). Neoinstitutional theory is perhaps best considered in terms of a series of nested levels through which meaning and process flow. There are five major societal institutions: the family, the state, the market, the corporation, the professions, and religion (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton and Ocasio 1999). Within society, organizations can coalesce into an organizational institution or an organizational field—a network of actors and organizations that, together, compose an area of institutional life (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Finally, organizations are comprised of individuals. Originally, institutional theory researchers focused on stability and isomorphism, but recent research adopts the concept of institutional logics for studying institutional change (Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer 2017; Hallett 2010).

Institutional logics are a "socially constructed, historical pattern of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton and Ocasio 1999, 804). Each of the major societal institutions offer distinct institutional logics that inform organizational fields and individuals. Organizations do not simply adopt these higher-level logics as a whole. Instead, they provide the raw materials from which to rationalize local, context-specific, field-level logics. For example, perspectives on kindergarten include both developmental and academic logics. While the logics of the family, such as care giving and obligation, underlie developmental logics (translated to nurturing human development), logics of the market, including self-interest and competition, translate to skills and achievement to inform academic logics (Russell 2011). Evolving dominant logics often coincide with contention and conflict, in part because these shifts often threaten or constrain the agency of the individual when initiated at the societal or field level (Smets, Morris, and Greenwood 2012; Thornton and Ocasio 2008). Globally, academic logics dominate the kindergarten setting, though developmental logics are still prevalent guiding forces (Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017; Russell 2011). This context places kindergarten teachers in a position where they must both interpret logics and blend them into their pedagogical practices.

Kindergarten, in the contemporary context, encapsulates the concept of organizational hybridity—"the combination of identities, forms, or logics that would conventionally not go together" (Smith and Besharov 2019, 2). By bridging competing logics, hybridity can bring legitimacy to the field (Tracey, Phillips, and Jarvis 2011), but sustaining hybridity is an ongoing struggle, as the organization must deal with ongoing challenges such as identity issues and stakeholder

contentions and pressures (Smith and Besharov 2019; Pache and Santos 2013). One such source of contention, in the context of kindergarten, is the use of play as pedagogical practice and the role of the teacher in that play (Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017; McInnes 2019).

Legitimacy, within institutional theory, can be defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman 1995, 574). In this regard, the inclusion of free play as part of the kindergarten curriculum became legitimate within the long-standing developmental logic (Russell 2011), but the legitimacy of play within the academic logic seems less clear-cut. To clarify, one must consider the three ingredients that combine to contribute to institutional legitimacy: regulative elements (i.e., rule setting, governance, and, as needed, sanctioning), normative elements (i.e., prescriptive and social acceptance stemming from alignment with dominant norms, beliefs, and values), and cultural cognitive elements (i.e., shared perceptions of reality and meaning) (Scott 2008).

As policy makers incorporate mandates for play-based pedagogies, with a focus on teacher-involved play, they contribute to the institutional social order and legitimacy within academic logics through the regulative dimension, because these mandates directly tie play to academic learning (Ontario Ministry of Education 2016; British Columbia Full Day Kindergarten Program 2010; Scott 1995, 2008). The extensive research linking teacher-involved play with beneficial outcomes (Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017; McInnes 2019) contributes to the legitimacy of play-based pedagogies through the normative elements. This evidence proscribes the value of teacher-involved play in academic learning as developmentally appropriate and fitting with academic goals in kindergarten. The final element, cultural cognitive, requires further consideration.

Legitimation is the process by which ideas or practices become commonly accepted as institutional norms (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975) and stems from acceptance by relevant social actors and stakeholders with sufficient standing to do so (Deephouse 1996). One key actor for many institutions is public opinion, "which has the important role of setting and maintaining standards of acceptability" (1025). This presents a potential issue to the full legitimation of play-based pedagogies within the academic logic. If stakeholders (e.g., parents and policy makers) maintain the narrow view of play as free play rather than evolving to understand it to include the value of teacher-involved play, they may impede the acceptance of play-based pedagogies as legitimate and normative within the

academic logic. In short, although researchers' perspectives of play continue to broaden and empirical evidence supporting the benefits of teacher involvement in that play accrues, other stakeholders in kindergarten may not consistently share these interpretations of a hybrid combination of developmental and academic logics.

## Play in a Hybrid Kindergarten Context

Kindergarten continues to evolve, but some institutional logics stabilize over time, resulting in an institutional memory—a shared understanding of meanings and best practices acquired through actual implementation (Hanson 2001). Often, elements of this knowledge are embedded in educators' personal knowledge rather than residing in documentation. Educators perpetuate and transfer this knowledge and understanding both through formal (e.g., professional development sessions) and informal interactions (e.g., imitation, socialization). While mandates continue to press for increased academics (Graue 2010; Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017), many teachers likely maintain strong ties to developmental logics, with free play as an integral part of this pedagogy. Especially when such teachers take on lead roles, we can see how views of play, and the teacher's role, might persist in the classroom despite contemporary preservice and in-service teaching. Concurrently, external stakeholders (e.g., parents and policy makers) may draw on their own experiences to construct their views about play in the classroom, experiences that may be decades old. Socialization by these stakeholders—colleagues, parents, administration—plays a vital role in shaping the experiences of new teachers, particularly those in kindergarten (Oplatka and Eizenberg 2007) and thus, may serve to influence understandings of play. These understandings may also be shaped by the media, which often reports on new educational mandates and their impacts on children's learning. The media are often subject to the same socialization biases and may not be familiar with the most recent research addressing play-based learning. Thus, when journalists communicate information about play-based learning to the general public, they may inadvertently perpetuate traditional, limited views of the purpose and implementation of play-based learning in classrooms.

If the entrenched view of play narrowly characterizes it as free play, typically associated with developmental benefits (Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017), then a potential outcome, assuming a dual perspective, is that teachers might

implicitly associate direct instruction with academic logics. Learning in the upper grades frequently relies on explicit instruction to meet increasingly complex academic objectives (Pyle, Poliszczuk, and Danniels 2018) and, thus, can filter down to kindergarten to achieve these objectives (Foote, Smith, and Ellis 2004; Hegde and Cassidy 2009; Li 2004). In short, a perpetuation of play as free play could inhibit the use of play-based strategies, as some teachers might not recognize a more nuanced, broader definition of play and the teacher's role in that play (McInnes 2019). Such a misalignment of meanings could emerge in practice as a need for more professional development, one of the identified barriers to enacting play-based pedagogy in the classroom.

The presence of dominant logics in a given institution do not necessarily equate with adherence to these logics, which might also extend our understanding of the implementation barriers we highlight for play-based pedagogies. In the context of institutional logics, the concept of coupling captures the degree to which logics inform practices, that is, the extent to which organizations respond to institutional pressures (Scott 2008). Coupling refers to the degree to which components of an organizational system link together and respond to changes in other components (Hasse and Krucken 2014).

Tight coupling involves strong adherence to the logics, even at the individual level, often as a means for securing legitimacy (Thornton and Ocasio 2008). This may occur due to strong buy-in or through the top-down enforcement some schools experience with increased accountability pressures (Hallet 2010). At the other end of the spectrum, loose coupling, which traditionally characterizes the school environment, involves some level of adherence to the logics. With numerous—at times conflicting—goals and context-specific needs, rule violations frequently occur at the school or even classroom level that arguably necessitate a loose coupling approach (Fusarelli 2002). Loose coupling involves symbolic adherence along some dimensions, with differences occurring at the individual level and "ceremonial compliance . . . (i.e., facades of conformity disconnected from actual practices)" (Hallet 2010, 43).

Viewed from this perspective, inconsistencies in implementation of play-based pedagogies may be an instance of loose coupling, where a teacher considers contextual elements and chooses another approach. In the present context, loose coupling would explain noted cases in which teachers devote more time to didactic instruction over play, despite mandated play-based curricula. The presence of some play is more symbolic than integrated (Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017). However, we also posit another interpretation: If teachers have

a narrow definition of play (i.e., as free play only), this loose coupling may be inadvertent. That is, teachers may be basing their integration of play-based pedagogies on free play rather than on the broader definition. Thus, they may believe that they are engaged in tight coupling (i.e., they incorporate free play into their classroom experience). Reinterpreting the aforementioned barriers, teachers indicating a struggle with play-based pedagogies may, in fact, be reporting difficulties increasing (free) play due to constraints of meeting academic standards (which they associate with didactic teaching practices).

Further theoretical depth offers insight into this definitional issue. Institutional logics provide a broad framework of shared meanings, but individual interpretations can still lead to diverse understandings and adjustments of attitudes and beliefs (Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002). The complexities of melding developmental and academic logics into a hybrid form likely exacerbate the influence of individual perceptions. Research suggests that teachers' broader social experiences and background, perhaps even more than school environment, inform their interpretations of changing logics (Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer 2017), which offers insight into previous findings that the implementation of play-based pedagogy can vary within the same school (Pyle and Danniels 2017). Thus, it is imperative also to consider broad er social discussions about play beyond the classroom and school to understand fully the barriers to more widespread implementation of play-based pedagogies in kindergarten and whether meanings of play are changing or remain consistent.

The theories surrounding institutional logics offer several insights into the underpinnings of the barriers inhibiting teachers' widespread use of play-based pedagogies. This literature suggests that the root of the problem might be a narrow definition of play, one that has not fully evolved within the transition to the contemporary kindergarten environment. This narrow definition may be perpetuated by various stakeholders and by ongoing misinterpretations of the concept of play-based learning, which leads to the appearance of loose coupling.

## Our Study

To understand current definitions of play and how they relate to perceptions of play-based pedagogies in kindergarten, we examine teachers' perceptions of the purpose of play and implementations in kindergarten classrooms, and media representations of the concept that help explain the views of the broader

public and the stakeholders therein (e.g., parents and policy makers). To do so, we gather kindergarten teachers' perspectives as well as media portrayals of play-based learning in kindergarten education. More broadly, we focus on the alignments and misalignments that may exist within public discourse, teacher perspectives and their self-described practices, and contemporary research.

Media both chronicles and affects public opinion; it can shape culture and society and even become an integral part of other institutions (Hjarvard 2008). Certainly, media can influence public opinion and perceptions by selecting (and discarding) topics and their framing of the discourse, but at the same time the media is responsive to the public, working in tandem to form cultural meaning and interpretation of events (Gamson et al. 1992; Gamson and Modigliani 1989). Artifacts from the media allow for a longitudinal examination of public perceptions. For example, Reay and Hinings (2009) included news reports to examine competing logics in the medical field. Humphreys and LaTour (2013) draw on an extensive examination of newspaper reporting to discuss the legitimation process for gambling. Russell (2011) used media as a data source to understand how, over the course of several decades, media coverage on kindergarten education shifted from a developmental to an academic perspective. Media coverage on the promotion of academic learning in kindergarten was prominent before policy discourse on the issue, suggesting that news outlets served to influence, as well as echo, public opinion and policy decisions on educational matters.

In the context of our study, news articles such as "In a Liberal Boston Suburb, Kindergarten Teachers Say Their Students Are Learning to 'Hate' School" (Strauss 2019) and "Ford Government Says Full-Day 'Learning' Will Stay, but It Won't Necessarily Be Kindergarten" (CBC 2019) indicate that play-based learning and academics continue to be part of the ongoing discourse around kindergarten and, thus, offer insight into stakeholder perceptions. For education, the cultural-cognitive elements of public opinion are particularly important: "The key constraint for educational institutions . . . is the need to maintain the trust and confidence of the public at large—in short, to maintain legitimacy by conforming to institutionalized norms" (Meyer and Rowan 2006, 5). Relevant stakeholders in the context of this research may include parents, policy influencers, and even teachers outside the kindergarten environment who may rely on the media to understand the terms "play" and "play-based pedagogy." As newspaper texts provide coverage of their preferred discourse, which may not be in line with teacher voices (Thomas 2000), combining this data source with insights from teachers will help provide a balanced, holistic view of current

play and play-based learning perceptions. Comparing these perspectives on play-based learning to identify both alignments and misalignments will help understand better the underpinnings of the barriers to implementation.

## Method

This qualitative study employed two main research methodologies: systematically reviewing news articles pertaining to play as a pedagogical approach and obtaining teacher perspectives through surveys and interviews with kindergarten teachers. Canada was selected as the site for this study as current policy mandates a play-based pedagogical approach in several provinces and the media has been actively reporting on this shift.

### *Data Methods and Sources*

Systematic review of news articles. We use media here to mean electronically published news articles in Canadian news outlets (both national and local). We employed Factiva, a global news database, to conduct the key word searches for news articles pertaining to play-based learning in Canada since its implementation. We chose to include news articles dated January 1, 2010, to July 13, 2020, in the search, because play-based learning was first implemented in a Canadian province (i.e., Ontario) in 2010. We conducted searches by province and specific search terms to reflect the terminology used in each province to refer to public school education for four- and five-year-old children. The search terms we used for Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Yukon, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Saskatchewan were: ("play-based" OR "play pedagogy") AND (kindergarten). The search terms we used for Quebec were: ("jeu") AND ("maternelle" OR "la petite enfance" OR "éducation préscolaire"). These key word searches generated a total of 890 articles, which included 285 duplicates (same article published by more than one news agency). We included only articles in the study that described the use of play as a pedagogical approach; we, therefore, excluded articles that used the term play but did not describe pedagogy. We also excluded search results that were not news articles (e.g., working papers). In total, we analyzed 170 articles. The table in figure 1 outlines the news articles generated by the search (included, excluded, duplicates) by province.

Figure 1. News articles on play-based learning and kindergarten by province

| *Provinces and Territories* | *Included* | *Excluded* | *Duplicates* | *Total* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ontario | 104 | 96 | 154 | 354 |
| British Columbia | 18 | 19 | 12 | 49 |
| Alberta | 9 | 25 | 14 | 48 |
| Quebec | 6 | 305 | 90 | 401 |
| Manitoba | 4 | 3 | 3 | 10 |
| Saskatchewan | 4 | 1 | 9 | 14 |
| Newfoundland and Labrador | 1 | 3 | 0 | 4 |
| Nova Scotia | 1 | 6 | 3 | 10 |
| New Brunswick | - | - | - | 0 |
| Northwest Territories | - | - | - | 0 |
| Nunavut | - | - | - | 0 |
| Prince Edward Island | - | - | - | 0 |
| Yukon | - | - | - | 0 |
| **Totals** | **147** | **458** | **285** | **890** |

Teacher surveys and interviews. To explore teachers' perspectives on the role of play in kindergarten classrooms, we collected data from 101 Ontario kindergarten teachers, querying their understanding of the role of play in classrooms, aspects of student learning that are enhanced through play, and examples of the enactment of play-based learning in their classrooms. We decided to focus on Ontario teachers for several reasons. First, Ontario has a long history of including play in curriculum documents and was one of the first provinces to specifically mandate the use of play-based pedagogy in kindergarten in 2010 (Ontario Ministry of Education 2010; Peterson, Forsyth, and McIntyre 2016). This offered a relatively conservative context, given our focus on the evolving definition of play in play-based pedagogies, because Ontario training and professional development and its teachers, in turn, would have had the most time to acquire a broader definition of play. Second, as a large portion of media coverage on play-based pedagogy came from Ontario (70.7 percent), we believe that the relationship between media discourse and stakeholder perceptions would be most evident in Ontario. (We note that articles focusing on other regions would also be available to Ontario teachers, parents, and other stakeholders.) Finally, we acknowledge that an Ontario sample was convenient, because the authors had existing relationships within Ontario to use for recruitment purposes.

After receiving university and relevant school district ethical approval, sixty-nine teachers participated in a survey containing six broad, open-ended questions (e.g., What aspects of student learning are enhanced by engaging in play? Please describe what play looks like in your classroom). The survey followed an open-call format. Analysis from the six open-ended questions informed the questionnaire created for subsequent semistructured in-person interviews. The interviews contained targeted questions to elicit in-depth responses to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' perspectives on the role of play in kindergarten education (e.g., What types of play do you think should occur in a kindergarten classroom? Can you describe approaches and examples of play-based learning in your classroom? Can you describe the shift towards play-based learning in kindergarten? How do you support student learning during play?). We conducted the semistructured interviews with thirty-two teachers from three separate school districts and one independent school to garner perspectives of teachers with diverse professional experiences. We audio recorded these interviews and transcribed them verbatim. The participating teachers taught in rural, suburban, and urban settings and had from one to twenty-eight years of experience as teachers, and from one to twenty years as kindergarten teachers. Among these teachers, the amount and type of previous training or professional development on the subject of play-based learning varied, 63 percent of the participants reported receiving some type of training on the role of play in kindergarten classrooms. These experiences ranged from professional development sessions to full courses on play. The other 37 percent stated that they had received no training in play.

### *Data Analysis*

We coded all data sources using Patton's (2015) method of constant comparison. With respect to news articles (N=170), we first open coded each article for emergent codes. Then, we generated categories and themes across the articles. We coded teacher survey data (i.e., responses to six open-ended questions) and teacher interview transcripts (i.e., responses to four open-ended questions) using the same method and sequence. We then carried out a comparative analysis of the themes across all three data sets, which resulted in the emergence of two overarching themes: the definition and purpose of play-based learning and the connection between academic learning and play-based learning (i.e., insight into coupling perspectives). These themes capture stakeholders' interpretations of play and play-based learning in the context of

a hybrid blend of academic and developmental logics, as well as their perceptions about coupling.

## Perspectives on the Definitions and Purpose of Play-Based Learning

*Media Portrayal*

Articles predominantly described play-based learning in terms of traditional understandings of play, with their definitions focused on the child-directed aspects of play (N=113). For example, one article described play-based learning as a space in which "children are allowed to play and direct their own learning with minimal direction from adults" (Laucius 2016). This description of play-based learning as a child-directed activity is antithetical to the intended meaning of the pedagogical approach, and it strictly reinforces the developmental logic by describing only free play (Fleer 2011). Absent are discussions of teacher-directed and teacher-guided play (Newbury et al. 2015) that support the integration of the academic logic into play-based learning contexts. Further highlighting this distinction, an article in the *Seaforth Huron Expositor* states that "the teaching style for the students is a shift to play-based learning, which is largely self-directed" (Murray 2013). These types of statements perpetuate the notion that teachers are passive observers during play (Andrews 2015). This media-perpetuated definition of play-based learning illustrates a misalignment between recent research on the variety of ways in which play-based learning can be implemented effectively in classrooms to support both developmental and academic learning. Media's exclusion of the vital role of teacher involvement and guidance in play-based pedagogies (Pyle and Danniels 2017) likely contributes to the separation of play and learning in the minds of parents, which, in turn, explains parental pressures as a barrier to implementing play-based learning.

Although contemporary research about the role of play in children's learning documents the increased potential for learning academic content through play as opposed to traditional teacher-directed instruction (Fisher 2011), many parents, educators, and policy makers still fail to understand fully the learning potential of their integration. A number of the news articles we reviewed perpetuated this problematic dichotomy by presenting play and academic activities as separate constructs. For example, one described play as "not work," suggesting that "the child is playing for the joy of the activity. . . . Only playing for fun is really playing" (Laucius 2012). Defining play in this limited manner problema-

tizes the possibility of constructing developmentally appropriate ways for children to engage in play activities with the purpose of developing their academic skills in classroom settings, an approach that is largely supported by research (Fisher 2011; Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017).

In some cases, the information shared in media not only misses the nuance of teacher involvement in play-based pedagogies, it misses expressly the academic logic altogether. As one article stated: "The kindergarten program is now 'play based' and early on there will be no expectations on pupils" (Cudworth 2014). Failing both to consider and describe the academic standards clearly communicated in kindergarten curriculum documents across the country (Ontario Ministry of Education 2016) and artificially separating play from potential academic gains may stem from reporters drawing on their own experiences in schools, schools which have long since evolved. This perpetuates the narrow definition of play in other stakeholders' institutional memory. These findings demonstrate that news outlets foster two important pieces of misinformation that do not align with contemporary research—that play is strictly child directed with little to no teacher influence and that play and academic learning occur separately.

In short, examining the media discourse reveals a gap in translation of research and policy, one in which the media garbles the meaning and nuance of play in a classroom setting and often ignores the role of the teacher in such play. This places teachers trying to enact play-based pedagogies in a difficult position. They must justify their pedagogical approach to external stakeholders who do not see the connection between academics and play. Interestingly, research examining children's perspectives reveal that children view play and learning as connected if they receive opportunities to engage in different types of play within their classrooms that also include educators supporting the integration of academic learning (Pyle and Alaca 2018). This emphasizes the role of teachers and their perceptions of play and play-based learning for effectively creating and communicating these connections.

### *Teacher Perspectives*

Our analysis of teacher interview transcripts and survey responses reveals that teachers in this study express two differing perspectives on play-based learning. The perspectives of one group of teachers (N=51) aligned with narrow, child-directed views of play, echoing the common discourse in the media: "Play in my classroom is essential. I follow the children's lead and interests and provide the necessary materials" (T66 Survey). Our analysis revealed that these teachers

treat play and academic learning as separate constructs. They were less likely to integrate academic learning into play opportunities because their students primarily engaged in free play with limited teacher involvement.

The second group of teachers (N=50) overcame the challenges posed by societal misinterpretations of play-based learning, expressing a broader view of play more in line with the intentions behind play-based learning: "Play is child driven, open ended, and has a focus and a purpose. Educators interact with students during play. Using what students know as a starting point, educators then scaffold for each individual child moving them along at their pace and level" (T6, Survey). The teachers in this group tended to share the belief that play offers a meaningful context for children's academic learning and, therefore, described the implementation of an integrative play-based learning program in their classrooms. Teachers in this group described the new play-based program as bridging the gap between the developmentally appropriate practice of play and the learning of academic skills. For them play is not simply a reward for completing academic work but a context in which academic work unfolds. Teachers' narratives in this group note that, within a play-based learning environment, their students were able to experiment with and practice academic skills, such as math, science, and literacy. As Teacher 5 explained: "Structures are great for physics, and science, and body awareness, you know. Why is your structure tipping? Oh, what if you stood on one leg? Does it make it harder to balance? Maybe your structure needs a more solid base? So always drawing in some sort of curricular connection" (Interview). This teacher captures the nuance between free play and teacher-guided play that encapsulates a play-based pedagogy—using play as the context for learning important academic skills and to promote children's exploration and discovery while enabling the development of higher-level thinking skills through inquiry processes initiated by children and guided by educators (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff 2013).

Teachers in this group do not exclude free play from their perspectives—that is, they do not replace the concept of free play with teacher-directed play in a dichotomous fashion. Instead, consistent with research (Pyle and Danniels 2017), they recognize play as a continuum, one in which teacher involvement is context specific. Teacher 2 explained: "It's just a matter of knowing the children as well and knowing when to step in. And then also when to stretch their thinking. So, when they're building something I'll say, do you think you can stack five more on top without it falling over? Do you think it's stable? It's knowing when to ask certain questions, or knowing when to intervene is my role"

(Interview). Elucidating the multiplicity of play contexts, this teacher reflects on when free play should continue and on when the teacher has an opportunity to step in. Teachers in this group embrace the value of free play but simultaneously perceive their role as extending and scaffolding children's learning during play when openings arise to achieve academic goals. The perspectives of this second group of teachers align with contemporary understandings of play as outlined in current research on play-based learning. Although play provides a meaningful context for children's learning and development, free play alone may be insufficient for children to meet academic goals and standards, which benefit from teacher intervention (Tsao 2008; Weisberg, Hirsch-Pasek, and Golinkoff 2013).

Consistent with prior research (Pyle, Poliszczuk, and Danniels 2018), our findings reveal two distinct perspectives of play among teachers, with approximately half adhering to the narrow definition that dominates media discourse. Digging into the teacher demographic information, we found no consistent pattern along a particular characteristic that might explain this observation. Age, teaching experience, and access to professional development and training vary across both groups. All respondents follow the same mandated play-based pedagogy, and yet respondents from the same school board—and even the same school—often differed between the narrow and broad definitions of play. Although our data does not allow us to speak to direct causality for this discrepancy, we can speculate on several potential contributing factors. Our media analysis reveals the perpetuation of meaning for play as free play and distinct from academic learning. Therefore, if kindergarten teachers already hold such perceptions then the media depictions only serve to reinforce these beliefs. In addition, parents can exert pressure on these teachers, affecting both their practice and their beliefs (Fung and Cheng 2012). With media framing the discourse and influencing opinions (Gamson et al. 1992) and their lack of distinction between free play and play-based pedagogy (made evident by our media analysis), parents may be advocating for less play. Such parental pressures are unevenly applied, so, of course, teachers will respond to them differently, and so, too, might this contribute to the observed differences in teacher descriptions of play-based pedagogical implementation. Gaps remain between current research on play-based learning, the information being communicated to the general public through the media, and the perspectives and enactment of play-based learning of some teachers.

Furthermore, our data shed light on whether the inconsistent approach to enacting play-based pedagogies is simply a case of loose coupling, with some teachers making symbolic gestures towards adopting play-based pedagogies.

Our analysis reveals a more complex relationship between teacher perspectives and either loose or tight coupling. On the surface, teachers who adopt a narrow view of play forego play-based pedagogy for didactic instruction to meet academic goals. Although they do include free play, it is not an integral part of their academics-related pedagogy. This fits with the conceptualization of loose coupling, but it does not appear to be an intentional violation of the logics to meet context-specific needs. These teachers communicate the belief that they are following a play-based pedagogy. Thus, the lack of tight coupling does not appear to stem from personal opinions about the validity of play-based pedagogies but rather from their interpretation and understanding of a core concept of play-based pedagogies (i.e., teacher involvement in play).

This may, in part, stem from a lack of training and professional development about play-based learning strategies, a previously identified impediment (Howard 2010; Pui-Wah and Stimpson 2004). However, our data does not fully support such an argument. Our interviews reveal the dichotomy between definitions of play by teachers from the same school districts (and even, at times, the same school) with equitable access to professional development opportunities. With similar access to the same training opportunities, the differences in professional development perspectives and implementation of play-based pedagogies might stem from the definition of play (narrow versus broad) that they take into the training, which likely frames the training message and learning outcomes of this professional development. A lack of consensus persists around the definition of play and, subsequently, an understanding of play-based learning and its purpose in kindergarten education (McInnes 2019). The lack of guidance for how teachers should implement play-based learning in their classrooms has led to challenges that even the second group of teachers experienced during their implementation (e.g., pressures from administration, parents, and teachers in later grades to implement more teacher-centric programming) (Howard 2010; Leggett and Ford 2013). Fundamental to this gap in understanding is a lack of communicated clarity about the connections between academic learning and play.

## Perspectives on the Connections between Academic and Play-Based Learning

*Media Portrayal*

A small number of articles (N=23) briefly discussed the integration of academic

learning in children's play: "There is more of a focus on literacy and math readiness, but it should still be, at that age, play-based" (Craats 2010). Interestingly, these articles come largely from the initial years of play-based implementation, illustrating that the dominant discourse describing play and learning as dichotomous and separate quickly subsumed discussions of integrating play with academic learning. Even when these few articles suggested that a play-based curriculum ensured that "literacy and numeracy are featured in the play" (Cudworth 2012), they offered no explanation to clarify how such integrations might appear in practice. Two narratives emerged most consistently within the media articles, each serving to entrench the meaning of play as free play rather than helping to evolve perceptions to recognize the key role of teacher involvement in play-based pedagogies.

### *Rehashing Old Debates*

Instead of describing how play and academic learning could be connected, the media raised concerns about the academic demands placed on early learners, revealing the unsettled nature of the debate over the broader role of kindergarten and the difficulties of integrating a hybrid logic structure and expressing concerns that kindergarten should be "all about play and not at all about results" (Laucius 2012). This discourse on enacted pedagogy reiterates the dichotomized view of play as distinct from academic learning: "That's the one concern with all-day kindergarten—it has to be play-based and it can't be about rushing kids into academic work and putting pressure and expectations on them" (Sherlock 2010). The narrow definition of play as free play, which aligns with the developmental logic on the benefits of play (Ghafouri and Wien 2005), seems to inhibit the ability of journalists to conceive of an integrated, play-based experience and potentially feeds misperceptions by stakeholders about such experience.

Incorporating discussions regarding the need for academics in kindergarten further muddles the discourse on play-based learning and pedagogy, because it implicitly raises the developmental versus academic logics debate in which play remains closely associated with developmental logics and explicit instruction with academic logics. Notably, although these articles rehashed this debate, they did so without discussing the existing academic standards outlined in kindergarten curricula and their appropriateness for kindergarten children. Nor did they address the research describing the importance of the development of foundational skills and the significant impact this learning has on later academic achievement (e.g., Duncan et al. 2007; McClelland, Acock, and Mor-

rison 2006). In other words, while research, academic standards, and curricula recognize the hybrid state of contemporary kindergarten blending the two logics, media discourses appear to be entrenched in a kindergarten that no longer exists.

### *Accountability and Stakeholder Pressure*

Although teachers clearly understand the hybrid nature of contemporary kindergarten, our data indicate that the interpretation of play adopted by teachers understandably feeds into their interpretation and enactment of play-based pedagogies. The presence of a third logic—accountability—exacerbates the tensions around enacting play-based pedagogies. Accountability logics, like academic logics, stem from the broader market logic and essentially argue that competition, measured through performance on indicators like standardized testing (such as that reported by Canada's Education Quality and Accountability Office), drive improved practices (Hallett 2010; Russell 2011). A full discussion of accountability logics lies beyond our scope here, but our respondents indicate how the ubiquitous presence of these logics invariably affects their pedagogical options. Media articles reflect these tensions by including in their discourse the question of whether play-based learning in kindergarten is compatible with Grade 1 standards and adequately prepares children for later grades.

One article cited a research study in which a principal "admitted that the kindergarten teachers at his school were receiving pressure from teachers in the primary grades to move away from play-based learning toward more formal instruction" (Maharaj 2017). Citing the need to start preparing kindergarten students for standardized testing in later grades insinuates that explicit instruction is better suited than play-based learning and leads to better academic outcomes, despite research that suggests otherwise (Fisher 2011; Hassinger-Das et al. 2018; Robertson, Morrissey, and Rouse 2018; Van Oers and Duijkers 2012). The tension between play-based learning and grade school readiness, referred to as "schoolification," reflects a contentious issue about student needs to acquire Grade 1 skills prior to entering Grade 1. The media, for its part, shares both sides of the debate, such that "some parents and educators think the kids don't get to play enough" (Wente 2013). However, the manner in which the media presents these discourses, such as sharing teacher dissent on the value of play-based learning, impedes enactment by legitimizing the views that such pedagogical approaches are unrelated to academic learning.

These two narratives, highly related, reflect this—although policies and mandates have long deserted the discourse about the role of kindergarten, it

continues to be a debated topic within the public sphere. Framing the discourse as developmental versus academic logics, the media perpetuates the dichotomization of play and academics for those who look to the media as a source of information. A professor quoted in *The Globe and Mail* further reinforces the stagnation of the debate and undermines the advancement and value of play-based pedagogy, stating that "the challenge is to improve play-based programs that contribute to lasting change in things like writing and number knowledge" (Alphonso 2014). Although this professor's assertions may support play-based programming, they imply—by suggesting that enactment must be improved—that teachers are not successfully implementing these pedagogies using best practices, that it is all somehow new and still in development. We acknowledge our data does not allow us to determine whether the media drives or reflects public opinion, but such causal attributions are not necessary. Instead, we note that the interaction between public and media is too entrenched in the discourse of "should or should not?"—leaving no space for discussing the broader perspective of play that incorporates various levels of teacher involvement. Giving voice to these tensions, the media invariably makes them salient to stakeholders, who in turn pressure teachers.

### *Teacher Perspectives*

While news articles problematized the inclusion of academic standards for kindergarten children, teachers clearly recognized the reality that academic standards are not novel to kindergarten curricula. For example, in Ontario, although the introduction of a mandate to implement play-based learning was novel to the introduction of the full-day kindergarten program (Ontario Ministry of Education 2010), academic standards were introduced more than a decade before in the 1998 Ontario Kindergarten Program document (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training 1998).

### *Dichotomy of Definitions*

According to our teacher respondents, the shift to play-based learning has not changed the emphasis on play and academic learning in kindergarten. Rather, it has influenced the implementation of play and academic learning in classrooms. Teacher 6 explained: "Play, in my interpretation, before was a reward for doing something serious. And then it changed so that play was something serious. You can actually hit curriculum by asking the right questions . . . so play started to have value as long as you can ask the right questions and get the

right conversations going it seems the play itself is learning" (Interview). In short, this teacher expresses how the hybridization and change in logics guiding kindergarten required a redefinition and broadening of play as a concept, which invariably changed pedagogical enactment. It is important to note that our teacher respondents universally believed their classroom practice reflected adherence to play-based pedagogy, indicating tight coupling with the hybrid logics. However, teachers' perceptions of play, and their role in that play, inescapably guided their described enactments of true play-based pedagogies.

### *Implementation Impediments and Definitions of Play*

Kindergarten included academic expectations even before the shift to play-based learning mandates. Children were previously expected to learn academic skills outside of the play context. Filling out worksheets, for instance, was a common practice in kindergarten despite not being developmentally appropriate in early learning. Current research indicates that instruction incorporating hands-on learning produces higher student outcomes (Flemington, Hewins, and Villiers 2011; Hersi and Bernacki 2018). The shift to play-based learning, therefore, provides teachers with a context in which to teach academic skills by building on children's interests and needs in a more developmentally appropriate manner. As Teacher 4 explained: "Now instead of a lot of worksheets it's hands-on . . . now it's gone a step further into the play-based learning, where they're exploring, more building on what they know, and what they're experiencing, and their interests" (Interview). Many teachers articulated a contemporary understanding of a play-based program as an integrative pedagogy in which children learn academic skills in the developmentally appropriate and meaningful context of play, but all of our respondents also shared the enactment challenges they face. These barriers largely mirror those discovered in previous research, which we have discussed, including: time constraints (Baker 2014), student-teacher ratios (Martlew, Stephen, and Ellis 2011), and stakeholder pressures to provide evidence of academic achievement (Fung and Cheng 2012; Lynch 2015; Peterson, Forsyth, and McIntyre 2015).

Analyzing how teachers frame these challenges sheds light on the different interpretations of play and, thus, play-based pedagogies. For example, when discussing a commonly shared view of misalignment between expectations and available time with students, Teacher 1 felt challenged: "I don't think children can learn everything just through play. . . . I wish I had more time for that explicit instruction around reading behaviors. Because I do think that they do pick it up

through the activities you're doing in the room, and I love that that can happen in an authentic way. But they need the tools first to do that, and I think those tools are best taught in those small group [teacher-directed] environments. And I feel restricted in terms of time" (Interview).

Though subtle, we note how this teacher, like others, distinguishes play as something to be layered onto teaching rather than as a context within which teaching occurs. Similarly, when discussing the accountability and academic pressures, Teacher 47 stated that "the expectations for reading levels entering into Grade 1 are high . . . which forces teachers to pull students from play to engage in teacher-directed small group work to raise their reading level for entry into Grade 1" (Survey). Although this teacher includes play in their classroom, the teacher pulls students from play for "real" learning (i.e., direct instruction). Such distinctions certainly emerge and coincide with narrow definitions of play. Yet our data reveal other factors that also inhibit consistent, widespread enactment of play-based pedagogies.

Even the teachers who expressed a contemporary view of play and who believed play-based learning to be an integrative approach to learning academic skills frequently cite concerns around accountability logics, including grade school readiness and advanced preparation for standardized testing. Although many teachers expressed their beliefs that children may learn academic skills in play, standardized testing in later grades requires children to learn particular targeted academic skills, measured in a manner that does not overtly fit with this approach. For instance, Teacher 6 explained: "They started to emphasize DRA [Developmental Reading Assessment] scores a lot more. So, they said we need the kids to achieve a reading standard by the end of kindergarten. And we'd always taught the kids to read, but all of a sudden it became more quantified. You know you need to hit these DRA scores" (Interview). This captures one of the struggles underpinning the hybridization process of institutions. With the merging of developmental, academic, and, in part, accountability logics, kindergarten continues to change, and there is no clear path for which elements of each logic to include, leading to perceptions of conflicting beliefs, values, and rules.

### *A Missing Piece for Legitimacy*

Research continually demonstrates that play-based pedagogies effectively result in academic learning (Fisher 2011; Pyle, DeLuca, and Daniels 2017), suggesting commensurability rather than conflict with the accountability logics and their associated standards. This highlights a misalignment between teacher per-

ceptions and research-based evidence. Our data offers some insight into why this may be the case. Describing experience with the adoption of a play-based pedagogy mandate, Teacher 11 shares a commonly felt lack of guidance: "The shift toward play-based learning, we were told it was happening and then were kind of left to figure it out on our own. And so I know from my experiences of visiting other kindergarten classrooms that there is a whole range" (Interview). This sense of being left to figure it out emerged frequently in teacher reports, suggesting inconsistent professional development and communication clarity.

At the very root of legitimacy and legitimating play-based pedagogies lies the need for commonly shared definitions (Scott 2008). The cultural-cognitive elements revolve around agreed upon, socially-constructed perceptions of meaning. As teachers express a sense of needing to find their own way, some might logically adopt the broader view of play incorporating free play and teacher-involved play. Considering several factors in conjunction—media perpetuation of play as distinct from academics, nonkindergarten teacher stakeholders adopting a similar perspective and pressuring for more academic emphasis, and an internal lack of guidance and training—many teachers may simply revert to direct instruction teaching and learning models (Cheng and Stimpson 2004; Fung and Cheng 2012; Hyvonen 2011).

Despite the benefits of play-based learning outlined in current research and of teachers' support and implementation of play-based learning in their classrooms, concerns and challenges remain. Both news outlets and teachers, including those who described the need to embed academic learning in the context of play, expressed concern about the disconnect between pedagogical mandates, classroom realities, and academic standards in kindergarten education, specifically in relation to grade school readiness. Ensuring consistent tight coupling and adherence to play-based pedagogies requires greater consensus and clarity around the role of play and academic learning in kindergarten education, communicated to and through media outlets.

## Conclusion

While play-based learning has gained prominence in many countries as an effective learning approach for young learners, there continues to be an inconsistent enactment of these pedagogies in kindergarten, even when policies mandate their use (Pyle, Peliszcuk, and Daniels 2018). Our study demonstrates the slow

pace of the shift from traditional pedagogical approaches to play-based learning. Play was always an accepted and valued part of kindergarten programs, but it has not traditionally been accepted as a means to academic learning. Our study illustrates just how challenging it can be to transition from traditional instructional approaches to contemporary learning approaches, like play-based learning, despite ample empirical support (Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels 2017). The Ontario curriculum and policy documents that mandate the play-based learning model, for instance, have now been in place for ten years (Ontario Ministry of Education 2016), and yet debates persist in the media and classrooms about its purpose and implementation. Adopting an institutional theory and logics approach, drawing on data gathered from analyzing ten years of media articles as well as input from more than one hundred kindergarten teachers, we examined stakeholder perceptions of play and play-based pedagogies to better understand the barriers to this implementation.

Our findings indicate that media depictions perpetuate a narrow view of play as a pleasurable, child-directed activity distinct from academic learning (i.e., free play) situated within the discourse debating the extent to which academic logics should exist in kindergarten. While free play aligns with developmental logics, such a narrow definition fails to align with broader contemporary views of play that consider the academic benefits of teacher involvement in play (Pyle, DeLuca, and Daniels 2017). Thus, not only is the media discourse misaligned with current understandings of play as a continuum, it also ignores the reality that academic logics already guide kindergarten mandates and practice in a hybrid combination with the developmental logic and the need for play-based pedagogies. This misalignment in understanding surrounding play as a concept is not limited to the media, however, as only half of our respondents described play in a manner consistent with the continuum approach, indicating a deficit in understanding and misalignment with the fundamentals of play-based pedagogies. This definitional discrepancy has important implications for establishing tight coupling with institutional mandates to adopt these pedagogical approaches.

Integrating teachers' perspectives with a broader reflection of societal views through media using institutional theory reveals that the divide in implementation of play-based pedagogies in the classroom is not a case of "bad" teachers, or even an intentional decision by those teachers to loosely couple from the mandated logics. The reality is quite the opposite—these teachers believe that they are tightly coupled to the mandate and enacting the logics to the best

of their abilities. Instead, this lens highlights that the problems inhibiting full implementation across classrooms, depicted by teachers as barriers, are rooted in a systemic perpetuation of a narrow definition of play as free play. Within this framework, we identify several possible solutions likely to be effective in remedying the situation.

Adopting a narrow definition of play—rather than integrating contemporary notions of a broader range of play that includes teacher involvement—biases the media discourse at the outset by setting up a false dichotomy between play and academic learning. As a reflection of the perspectives of key kindergarten stakeholders, including parents, policy makers, and even the teachers themselves, these biased media discourses, perhaps inadvertantly, mislead the public and lead to downstream consequences such as pressuring teachers to adopt direct instruction (traditionally aligned with academic logics) despite the benefits and appropriateness of play-based pedagogies. In short, if play-based learning is to be implemented effectively in schools, it needs the support of educators, administrators, parents, and policy makers. Just as the media may have inadvertently shaped or reinforced parents' and other stakeholders' perspectives through the perpetuation of a narrow definition of play, media may also be an effective channel for updating those stakeholder perspectives emphasizing teacher involvement in play and the nuances and benefits of play-based pedagogies. This should lessen the pressure on kindergarten teachers and open them to explore how to expand their own views. Such a task, though, cannot be left to the media alone, because they may not even see a problem with their reporting. Instead, research leaders in the field who understand the value of teacher-involved play should reach out to media contacts to expressly clarify these nuances.

Secondly, it is clear that preservice and in-service development opportunities can improve by offering direct support for teachers to elevate play to address academic standards. Similar to our recommendation for media contacts, we suggest that the continuum approach be integrated into relevant professional development opportunities. It is possible that the training relating to play-based pedagogies may focus on implementation (i.e., how to do it) rather than the more fundamental element of how the broader definition of play that incorporates teacher involvement is a necessary component. The effect of such an approach would be that teachers frame the training through the lens of free play and learn how such an approach leads to academic learning. Though this is speculative, it is consistent with our data.

Where education is closely tied to political mandates, the media often serves

as an important source of information for the voting public. When politicians and parents, key stakeholders in education, are misinformed about teaching practice, they can make erroneous decisions. In the context of play, Ontario political leaders are considering altering the fabric of the full-day kindergarten program (in place for ten years) by replacing teachers with early childhood educators (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2019). This reflects perceptions of play as free play and does not align with current research. This is why media is so important. In perpetuating traditional views of play, kindergarten, and perhaps even teaching more broadly, the media can impede true educational reform that recognizes advances in our understanding of how children learn.

## References

Alphonso, Caroline. 2014. "Full-Day Kindergarten Offers Little Academic Advantage, Study Says." *The Globe and Mail*, March 28. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/full-day-kindergarten-offers-no-academic-advantage-study-says/article17715532.

Andrews, Nicole. 2015. "Building Curriculum during Block Play." *Dimensions of Early Childhood* 43:11–15.

Baker, Fiona Sally. 2014. "Teachers' Views on Play-Based Practice in Abu Dhabi Kindergartens." *International Journal of Early Years Education* 22:271–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2014.944884.

Bergen, Doris. 2002. "The Role of Pretend Play in Children's Cognitive Development." *Early Childhood Research & Practice* 4:1–12.

Berk, Laura E., and Adena B. Meyers. 2013. "The Role of Make-Believe Play in the Development of Executive Functions: Status of Research and Future Directions." *American Journal of Play* 6:98–110.

Bridwell-Mitchell, E. N., and David G. Sherer. 2017. "Institutional Complexity and Policy Implementation: How Underlying Logics Drive Teacher Interpretations of Reform." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 39:223–47.

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. 2019. "Ford Government Says Full-Day 'Learning' Will Stay, but It Won't Necessarily be Kindergarten." *CBC News,* February 1. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ford-government-says-full-day-learning-will-stay-but-it-won-t-necessarily-be-kindergarten-1.5002881.

Cheng, Doris Pui-Wah and Philip Stimpson. 2004. "Articulating Contrasts in Kindergarten Teachers' Implicit Knowledge on Play-Based Learning." *International Journal of Educational Research* 41:339–52.

Christie, James F., and Kathleen A. Roskos. 2013. "Play's Potential in Early Literacy Development." *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*. http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/sites/default/files/textes-experts/en/774/plays-potential-in-

early-literacy-development.pdf.
Craats, R. 2010. "Mimicking Kids 'Go to School.'" *Calgary Herald*, March 4.
Cudworth, Laura 2012. "Popular Program Expanding\Full-Day Kindergarten." *Stratford Beacon Herald*, January 14.
———. 2014. "School is Just around the Corner\Education: Experts Offer Tips to Ease the Transition into Kindergarten." *Stratford Beacon Herald*, August 29.
Cuban, Larry. 1992. "Why Some Reforms Last: The Case of the Kindergarten." *American Journal of Education* 100:166–94.
Deephouse, David L. 1996. "Does Isomorphism Legitimate?" *Academy of Management Journal* 39:1024–39.
DiMaggio, Paul J., and Walter W. Powell. 1983. "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields." *American Sociological Review* 48:147–60.
Dowling, John, and Jeffrey Pfeffer. 1975. "Organizational Legitimacy: Social Values and Organizational Behavior." *Pacific Sociological Review* 18:122–36.
Duncan, Greg J., Chantelle J. Dowsett, Amy Claessens, Katherine Magnuson, Aletha C. Huston, Pamela Klebanov, Linda S. Pagain, Leon Feinstein, Mimi Engel, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Holly Sexton, Kathryn Duckworth, Crista Japel. 2007. "School Readiness and Later Achievement." *Developmental Psychology* 43:1428–46.
Fisher, Julie. 2011. "Building on the Early Years Foundation Stage: Developing Good Practice for Transition into Key Stage 1." *Early Years* 31:31–42.
Fleer, Marilyn. 2011. "'Conceptual Play': Foregrounding Imagination and Cognition during Concept Formation in Early Years Education." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 12:224–40.
Flemington, Krista, Linda Hewins, and Una Villiers. 2011. *Journey to Literacy: No Worksheets Required*.
Foote, Lyn, John Smith, and Fiona Ellis. 2004. "The Impact of Teachers' Beliefs on the Literacy Experiences of Young Children: A New Zealand Perspective." *Early Years* 24:135–47.
Friedland, Roger, and Robert R. Alford. 1991. "Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions." In *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, edited by Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, 232–63.
Fung, Chanel Kit Ho, and Doris Pui Wah Cheng. 2012. "Consensus or Dissensus? Stakeholders' Views on the Role of Play in Learning." *Early Years* 32:17–33.
Fusarelli, Lance D. 2002. "Tightly Coupled Policy in Loosely Coupled Systems: Institutional Capacity and Organizational Change." *Journal of Educational Administration* 40:561–75.
Gamson, William A., David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Theodore Sasson. 1992. "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality." *Annual Review of Sociology* 18:373–93.
Gamson, William A., and Andre Modigliani. 1989. "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach." *American Journal of Sociology* 95:1–37.

Ghafouri, Farveh, and Carol Anne Wien. 2005. "'Give Us a Privacy': Play and Social Literacy in Young Children." *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 19:279–91.

Ginsburg, Herbert P. 2006. "Mathematical Play and Playful Mathematics: A Guide for Early Education." In *Play = Learning: How Play Motivates and Enhances Children's Cognitive and Social-Emotional Growth,* edited by Dorothy G. Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, 145–68.

Graue, Elizabeth. 2010. "Reimagining Kindergarten." *Education Digest* 75:28–34.

Hallett, Tim. 2010. "The Myth Incarnate: Recoupling Processes, Turmoil, and Inhabited Institutions in an Urban Elementary School." *American Sociological Review* 75:52–74.

Hanson, Mark. 2001. "Institutional Theory and Educational Change." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 37:637–61.

Hasse, Raimund, and Georg Krücken. 2014. "Decoupling and Coupling in Education." In *From Globalization to World Society: Neo-Institutional and Systems-Theoretical Perspectives,* edited by Boris Holzer, Fatima Kastner, and Tobias Werron, 197–214.

Hassinger-Das, Brenna, Jennifer M. Zosh, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, and Roberta M. Golinkoff. 2018. "Playing to Learn Mathematics." *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*. http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/play-based-learning/according-experts/playing-learn-mathematics.

Hegde, Archana V., and Deborah J. Cassidy. 2009. "Kindergarten Teachers' Perspectives on Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP): A Study Conducted in Mumbai (India)." *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 23:367–81.

Hersi, Afra Ahmed, and Jessica Bernacki. 2018. "Play-Based Literacy Instruction: Interactive Learning in a Kindergarten Classroom." In *The Handbook of Research on Pedagogies and Cultural Considerations for Young English Language Learners,* edited by Grace Onchwari and Jared Keengwe, 377–95.

Hjarvard, Stig. 2008. "The Mediatization of Society: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change." *Nordicom Review* 29:105–34.

Holt, Nicholas L., Homan Lee, Carolyn A. Millar, and John C. Spence. 2015. "'Eyes on Where Children Play': A Retrospective Study of Active Free Play." *Children's Geographies* 13:73–88.

Howard, Justine. 2010. "Early Years Practitioners' Perceptions of Play: An Exploration of Theoretical Understanding, Planning and Involvement, Confidence, and Barriers to Practice." *Educational & Child Psychology* 27:91–102.

Hyvönen, Pirkko Tellervo. 2011. "Play in the School Context? The Perspectives of Finnish Teachers." *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 36:65–83.

Humphreys, Ashlee, and Kathryn A. Latour. 2013. "Framing the Game: Assessing the Impact of Cultural Representations on Consumer Perceptions of Legitimacy." *Journal of Consumer Research* 40:773–95.

Kim, Mina. 2004. "Teachers' Philosophical Orientation and Practices: A Study of Novice Preschool Teachers in South Korea." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 5:276–92.

Laucius, Joanne 2012. "Young Brains Need Play: Preschoolers Learn Best while Having

Fun." *The Windsor Star*, February 11.
———. 2016. "Into the Woods: Rain or Shine, Forest School Students Spend All Day Outside." *Ottawa Citizen*, April 30. https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/into-the-woods-rain-or-shine-forest-school-students-spend-all-day-outside.
Leggett, Nichole, and Margot Ford. 2013. "A Fine Balance: Understanding the Roles Educators and Children Play as Intentional Teachers and Intentional Learners within the Early Years Learning Framework." *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 38:42–50.
Li, Yuen Li. 2004. "The Culture of Teaching in the Midst of Western Influence: The Case of Hong Kong Kindergartens." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 5:330–48.
Ling-Yin, Lynn Ang. 2006. "Steering Debate and Initiating Dialogue: A Review of the Singapore Preschool Curriculum." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 7:203–12.
Lynch, Meghan. 2014. "Ontario Kindergarten Teachers' Social Media Discussion about Full Day Kindergarten." *McGill Journal of Education* 49:329–47.
———. 2015. "Guys and Dolls: A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Views of Gendered Play in Kindergarten." *Early Child Development and Care* 185:679–93.
Maharaj, Sachin. 2017. "Why We Should End EQAO Testing." *The Toronto Star*, October 16. https://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2017/10/16/why-we-should-end-eqao-testing.html.
Martlew, Joan, Christine Stephen, and Jennifer Ellis. 2011. "Play in the Primary School Classroom? The Experience of Teachers Supporting Children's Learning through a New Pedagogy." *Early Years* 31:71–83.
McClelland, Megan M., Alan C. Acock, and Frederick J. Morrison. 2006. "The Impact of Kindergarten Learning-Related Skills on Academic Trajectories at the End of Elementary School." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 21:471–90.
McInnes, Karen. 2019. "Playful Learning in the Early Years—Through the Eyes of Children." *Education 3-13* 47:796–805.
Meyer, Heinz-Dieter, and Brian Rowan. 2006. "Institutional Analysis and the Study of Education." In *The New Institutionalism in Education*, edited by Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Brian Rowan, 1–13.
Murray, M. 2013. "Huron Centennial undergoing Renovations to Accommodate Full-Day Kindergarten Starting this September\$320,920 Set aside for the Project." *Seaforth Huron Expositor*, April 24.
Myck-Wayne, Janice. 2010. "In Defense of Play: Beginning the Dialog about the Power of Play." *Young Exceptional Children* 13:14–23.
Newbury, Ken, Deborah Wooldridge, Susan Peet, and Cynthia Bertelsen. 2015. "From Policy to Practice: Laying the Foundation for Future Math Success." *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin* 81:8–17.
Ontario Ministry of Education. 2010. *The Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten Program: 2010–11*. https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/kindergarten_english_june3.pdf.
———. 2016. *The Kindergarten Program, 2016*. https://files.ontario.ca/books/edu_the_

kindergarten_program_english_aoda_web_oct7.pdf.
Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. 1998. *The Kindergarten Program, 1998.*
Oplatka, Izhar, and Mervar Eizenberg. 2007. "The Perceived Significance of the Supervisor, the Assistant, and Parents for Career Development of Beginning Kindergarten Teachers." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 23:339–54.
Pache, Anne-Claire, and Filipe Santos. 2012. "Inside the Hybrid Organization: Selective Coupling as a Response to Competing Institutional Logics." *Academy of Management Journal* 56:972–1001.
Pan, Yue-Juan, and Xia Li. 2012 "Kindergarten Curriculum Reform in Mainland China and Reflections." In *Early Education in a Global Context,* edited by John A. Sutterby, 1–26.
Patton, Michael Quinn. 2015. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice.* 4th ed.
Peterson, Shelley Stagg, Donna Forsyth, and Laureen J. McIntyre. 2015. "Balancing Play-Based Learning with Curricular Mandates: Considering the Views of Northern Canadian Teachers and Early Childhood Educators." *Canadian Children* 40:40–47.
Pramling Samuelsson, Ingrid, and Eva Johansson. 2006. "Play and Learning—Inseparable Dimensions in Preschool Practice." *Early Child Development and Care* 176:47–65.
Pyle, Angela, and Betül Alaca. 2018. "Kindergarten Children's Perspectives on Play and Learning." *Early Child Development and Care* 188:1063–75.
Pyle, Angela, and Erica Danniels. 2017. "A Continuum of Play-Based Learning: The Role of the Teacher in Play-Based Pedagogy and the Fear of Hijacking Play." *Early Education and Development* 28:274–89.
Pyle, Angela, Christopher DeLuca, and Erica Danniels. 2017. "A Scoping Review of Research on Play-Based Pedagogies in Kindergarten Education." *Review of Education* 5:311–51.
Pyle, Angela, Daniel Poliszczuk, and Erica Danniels. 2018. "The Challenges of Promoting Literacy Integration within a Play-Based Learning Kindergarten Program: Teacher Perspectives and Implementation." *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 32:219–33.
Reay, Trish, and C. R. Hinings. 2009. "Managing the Rivalry of Competing Institutional Logics." *Organization Studies* 30:629–52.
Riek, Jodie. 2015. "Reinstating P.L.A.Y. Pedagogy in Early Elementary Classrooms." *International Journal of Early Childhood Learning* 22:1–10.
Robertson, Natalie, Anne-Marie Morrissey, and Elizabeth Rouse. 2018. "Play-Based Learning Can Set Your Child Up for Success at School and Beyond." *The Conversation*, February 21. http://theconversation.com/play-based-learning-can-set-your-child-up-for-success-at-school-and-beyond-91393.
Rogers, Sue, and Julie Evans. 2007. "Rethinking Role Play in the Reception Class." *Educational Research* 49:153–67.
Russell, Jennifer Lin. 2011. "From Child's Garden to Academic Press: The Role of Shifting Institutional Logics in Redefining Kindergarten Education." *American Educational Research Journal* 48:236–67.

Scott, W. Richard. 1995. *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas, Interests, and Identities.*
———. 2008. "Approaching Adulthood: The Maturing of Institutional Theory." *Theory and Society* 37:427–42.
Sherlock, Tracy. 2010. "One in Five Hyperactive Kids Possibly Misdiagnosed: Study." *Global News*, September 13. https://globalnews.ca/news/97323/one-in-five-hyperactive-kids-possibly-misdiagnosed-study.
Shine, Kathryn, and Tom O'Donoghue. 2013. "Teacher Representation in News Reporting on Standardised Testing: A Case Study from Western Australia." *Educational Studies* 39:385–98.
Smets, Michael, Tim Morris, and Royston Greenwood. 2012. "From Practice to Field: A Multilevel Model of Practice-Driven Institutional Change." *Academy of Management Journal* 55:877–904.
Smith, Peter K., and Anthony D. Pellegrini. 2013. "Learning through Play." *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*. http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/play/according-experts/learning-through-play.
Smith, Wendy K., and Marya L. Besharov. 2019. "Bowing before Dual Gods: How Structured Flexibility Sustains Organizational Hybridity." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 64:1–44.
Spillane, James P., Brian J. Reiser, and Todd Reimer. 2002. "Policy Implementation and Cognition: Reframing and Refocusing Implementation Research." *Review of Educational Research* 72:387–431.
Strauss, Valerie. 2019. "In a Liberal Boston Suburb, Kindergarten Teachers Say Their Students Are Learning to 'Hate' School." *The Washington Post*, June 13. https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/06/13/liberal-boston-suburb-kindergarten-teachers-say-their-students-are-learning-hate-school/?utm_term=.05df20813ea1.
Suchman, Mark C. 1995. "Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches." *Academy of Management Review* 20:571–610.
Synodi, Evanthia. 2010. "Play in the Kindergarten: The Case of Norway, Sweden, New Zealand, and Japan." *International Journal of Early Years Education* 18:185–200.
Tafa, Eufimia. 2008. "Kindergarten Reading and Writing Curricula in the European Union." *Literacy* 42:162–70.
Tal, Clodie, Eshtiak Fares, Rim Azmi, and Waffa Waab. 2008. "Beyond Learning and Teaching in Preschool Free-Play Centers in Daliat El-Carmel-Isfiya." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 36:281–89.
Thomas, Sue. 2004. "Reconfiguring the Public Sphere: Implications for Analyses of Educational Policy." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 52:228–48.
Thornton, Patricia H., and William Ocasio. 1999. "Institutional Logics and the Historical Contingency of Power in Organizations: Executive Succession in the Higher Education Publishing Industry, 1958–1990." *American Journal of Sociology* 105:801–43.
———.2008. "Institutional Logics." In *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, edited by Royston Greenwood, Christine Oliver, Roy Sudday, and Kerstin Sahlin, 99–128.
Tracey, Paul, Nelson William Phillips, and Owen Jarvis. 2011. "Bridging Institutional

Entrepreneurship and the Creation of New Organizational Forms: A Multilevel Model." *Organization Science* 22:60–80.

Tsao, Ya-Lun. 2008. "Using Guided Play to Enhance Children's Conversation, Creativity, and Competence in Literacy." *Education* 128:515–20.

Van Oers, Bert, and Debbie Duijkers. 2013. "Teaching in a Play-Based Curriculum: Theory, Practice, and Evidence of Developmental Education for Young Children." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 45:511–34.

Wallerstedt, Cecilia, and Niklas Pramling. 2012. "Learning to Play in a Goal-Directed Practice." *Early Years* 32:5–15.

Weisberg, Deena Skolnick, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff. 2013. "Guided Play: Where Curricular Goals Meet a Playful Pedagogy." *Mind, Brain, and Education* 7:104–12.

Weisberg, Deena Skolnick, Jennifer M.Zosh, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff. 2013. "Talking It Up: Play, Language Development, and the Role of Adult Support." *American Journal of Play* 6:39–54.

Wente, Margaret. 2013. "Full-Day Kindergarten Is No Magic Bullet." *The Globe and Mail*, October 3. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/full-day-kindergarten-is-no-magic-bullet/article14665372.

Wood, Elizabeth, and Jane Attfield. 2005. *Play, Learning, and the Early Childhood Curriculum*.