

## Book Review

## **Serious fun: How guided play extends children's learning co-edited by Marie M. Masterson and Holly Bohart**

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The book *Serious Fun: How Guided Play Extends Children's Learning*, co-edited by Marie M. Masterson and Holly Bohart and published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), has been written by highly acclaimed authors, with contributors involved in extensive research of children's learning through play. This is an exceptional, timely book that takes a unique perspective on children's play and elucidates the importance of not only play, but also the teachers' role as intentional facilitators. With each chapter illustrating how to meaningfully combine children's interests with learning objectives and opportunities, this book targets deepening children's learning, and making play both educational and enjoyable.

The book comprises two parts, *Intentionally creating play environments for Learning*, and *Providing rich content experiences through play*, with eight chapters in total. The foreword by the editors, emphasises that playful instruction may look "different depending on your goals for children, the situation, and individual children's abilities and interests" (Masterson & Bohart, 2019, p. 3). This, prompts the readers who are responsible for intentionally design play-based curriculum in their settings to build the curriculum on the funds of knowledge brought by each child, which in turn "can result in deep, rich learning for children" (p. 4). The foreword also incorporates NAEYC's position statement on equity and diversity that encourages teachers to instill principles of fairness, social justice and equitably support each child's learning journey.

Part One - *Intentionally creating play environments for learning*, comprises two chapters and focuses on looking at play through scientific and pragmatic lens, including recent insights from neuroscience and its implications for understanding learning through play; as well as guidance on how an intentional teacher can meet the educational objectives through timely observations and planning. Each chapter integrates practical examples and reflection, alongside a "Try This!" element suggesting a number of practical ideas on how the theoretical aspects explored in the chapter can be utilised in practice.

Part Two - *Providing rich content experiences through play*, consists of six chapters, and explores how content-rich activities stem from children's natural curiosity and drive for exploration of the surrounding world, and navigates the reader through play-based educational activities related to specific curriculum areas.

In particular, a chapter on supporting language through culturally rich, dramatic play is grounded in sociodramatic type of play and draws on intercultural study conducted in a Spanish/English classroom. This chapter sparks readers intercultural conversations through verbal mapping, print-rich design of the setting; and suggests to facilitate children's play through intentional support from teachers, interaction with peers during play, and "meaningful opportunities to practice their new communication skills" (Salinas-Gonzalez, Arreguin-Anderson, & Alanis, 2019, p. 43). The following chapter suggests ways of connecting art, literacy and drama through storytelling by using Reggio Emilia perspective and bringing children's stories to life through art reproduction and subsequent discussion. This approach, according to authors, fostered the children's developmental growth across many domains, and a combination of art, expression and discussion of their project with the children resulted in a rich synergy of learning, social interaction and individual creative expression.

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In the next two chapters, early Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics experiences are given particular attention, with play being central to acquiring confidence and academic skills in this curriculum area. Mathematical activities facilitated through play were intentional on the part of the teacher, and children's understanding was assessed through careful observation and involving all participating children in a conversation. The critical focus of these chapters extends to reflection on the importance of intentional, planned activities and teacher-initiated versus child-initiated learning. Central to this discussion is setting high goals and engaging children in problem-solving activities in order to make sense of their world through play.

Exploration of natural materials and engaging and enriching play through child-directed approaches to learning is the focus of the following chapters. Stretching children's abilities and expanding play through risk taking in the outdoor area was supported by a degree of instructional support where children were given the freedom to pursue their interests, engaging them in discussion-based learning and prompting rich vocabulary for their findings. According to the authors, such an approach lays a solid foundation for the children's rigorous academic learning in the future.

Children's play remains a complex area that is open to various levels of interpretation. The early childhood sector is over-due for a book like this which offers a range of diverse, current perspectives on play, its shifting theoretical foundations and, importantly, a book that depicts how intentional teaching today becomes a critical tool for early childhood teachers supporting learning across a range of developmental domains and curriculum areas. The diversity of perspectives presented in this book make it an elegant addition to ongoing discussion about the role of play in children's learning.

**Reference**

Masterson, M.L., & Bohart, H. (2019). *Serious fun: How guided play extends children's learning*. Washington DC: NAEYC Books.