

# Examining Rhetorics of Play in Curricula in Five Provinces: Is Play at Risk in Canadian Kindergartens?

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Shelley Stagg Peterson  
*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education*

Jim Anderson  
Maureen Kendrick  
Marianne McTavish  
*University of British Columbia*

Kathy Budd  
*Peace River School Division*

Debra Mayer  
*Manitoba Education and Training*

Laureen McIntyre  
*University of Saskatchewan*

Burcu Yaman Ntelioglou  
*Brandon University*

Dianne Riehl  
*Toronto District School Board*

## Abstract

In this article, school division and Ministry of Education–based early childhood consultants and university researchers respond to the question of whether play is at risk in kindergartens in five Canadian provinces by analyzing current and previous kindergarten curricula using Sutton-Smith's framework of rhetorics of play. We find that play is integral to kindergarten curricula in Saskatchewan and Ontario, but only implicitly mentioned in the Alberta, British Columbia, and Manitoba curricula where support documents provide more support for play. The rhetoric of play as progress is the dominant discourse of current kindergarten curricula.

*Keywords:* play, kindergarten, curriculum analysis, rhetorics of play, Canadian provincial curricula

## Résumé

Des conseillers en services de garde en poste dans des divisions scolaires et des ministères de l'Éducation ainsi que des chercheurs universitaires se sont vu demander si le jeu est à risque dans les maternelles de cinq provinces canadiennes; pour ce faire, ils ont analysé les programmes actuels et antérieurs des maternelles à l'aide des rhétoriques du jeu de Sutton-Smith. Les auteurs de l'article concluent que le jeu fait partie intégrante des curriculums des maternelles en Saskatchewan et en Ontario, mais qu'il est seulement mentionné implicitement dans les curriculums de l'Alberta, de la Colombie-Britannique et du Manitoba où les documents d'appui accordent plus de place au jeu. La rhétorique du jeu comme progrès est le discours dominant des curriculums actuels dans les maternelles.

*Mots-clés :* jeu, maternelle, analyse du curriculum, rhétoriques du jeu, curriculums provinciaux canadiens

### Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for funding this work through a Partnership Grant.

## Introduction

Canadian teachers and parents are asking questions about whether play should be part of kindergarten. They question whether kindergarten curriculum and practice should emphasize academic learning, taking the role of a preparation ground for primary school, or whether the role of kindergarten is to serve as a continuation of the informal learning of preschool (Peterson, Forsyth, & McIntyre, 2015). Many early childhood researchers and educators feel that these questions have already been answered. Moyles (2015), for example, writes that the value of play to children's learning and development is well established. She believes that such questioning takes "energy that would best be expended on developing more effective and playful pedagogies" (p. 15). Taking a critical perspective, early childhood theorists and researchers point out that children's play "varies from one community to another depending on how children's communities are structured, how play is defined, and the kind of significance attributed to children's play in their communities" (Göncü, Tuermer, Jain, & Johnson, 1999, p. 162). They urge stakeholders to continue questioning assumptions about the role of play in kindergartens, recognizing that

play is ambiguous and complex, in terms of the content, social interactions, symbolic meanings, communicative languages and the environmental affordances that mediate play and playfulness. Meanings are produced dynamically, drawing on the socio-cultural-historical resources of the players and their multiple, shifting identities. (Wood, 2013, p. 156)

In a desire to be seen as providing an effective start to children's school learning, education policy makers and curriculum developers, drawing on research showing that young children's academic performance and attitudes can have a lasting impact on their progress throughout school, are placing increasing focus on academics in kindergarten and early childhood education (Yelland & Kilderry, 2005). Play and other activities that are "freely chosen, personally driven and intrinsically motivated" are either disappearing from kindergarten classrooms or are being used as a means to achieve educational purposes (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010, p. 90).

Our contributions to these conversations take the form of an analysis of how play is explicitly and implicitly represented in curricula across five Canadian provinces. We

present a range of perspectives: a northern Alberta school division consultant's perspective, a Manitoba Department of Education consultant's perspective, a southern Ontario urban school board vice-principal/seconded Ministry of Education consultant's perspective, and teacher educators'/researchers' perspectives from British Columbia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. We draw on our experiences in these various roles and use Sutton-Smith's (1997) influential construct or frame, *rhetorics of play*, to analyze references to play in current and historical curricula in an effort to trace changing assumptions about play and its role in kindergarten classrooms.

We report on curriculum analyses, recognizing that curriculum mediates teachers' classroom interactions with children, but that teachers' fidelity to curriculum is contingent on many factors, including teachers' background knowledge and preparation, classroom climate and the availability of resources (Vartuli & Rohs, 2009). Research shows that teachers may even carry out activities specified in curriculum documents but fail to create the learning environments that curriculum developers intended (Brown, Pitvorec, Ditto, & Kelso, 2009). Curriculum fidelity involves more than simply following specific pedagogical practices; it also involves teachers' consideration of underlying philosophies and theoretical approaches (Superfine, Marshall, & Kelso, 2015).

We begin with a description of Sutton-Smith's framework. For each province, we briefly summarize the historical contexts of kindergarten and identify rhetorics of play within current kindergarten curricula in our five provinces. We conclude with our views of whether play is at risk in our provinces' kindergarten classrooms, and provide recommendations for assuring that play is not at risk, but that it does have a place in Canadian kindergartens.

## Rhetorics of Play

Sutton-Smith (1997) defines rhetoric of play as a "persuasive discourse" or "implicit narrative" (p. 8) that influences views of play and the ways in which adults create space for play in children's lives. Discourses underlying five of Sutton-Smith's rhetorics of play (rhetoric of play as progress, rhetoric of the self, rhetoric of the imaginary, rhetoric of identity, and rhetoric of frivolity) have been particularly influential in the development of

kindergarten curricula and in shaping the views of educators, school administrators, and parents of kindergarten-aged children in the five provinces in which we live and work.

Those who support the *rhetoric of play as progress* believe that children learn through play and that there are cognitive and academic benefits to play. The *rhetoric of the self* reflects a view of play as a natural and personally satisfying activity that leads to engagement and enjoyment. Taylor (2013a) identifies this rhetoric as a romantic view of play, based on Froebel's notion of play as a natural and normal part of childhood. Closely related is the *rhetoric of the imaginary*, in which play is viewed as child-directed and as a forum for developing creativity. The *rhetoric of identity* focuses on social relationships and social identities created in play settings—recognizing that children's constructions of their identities are influenced by the ways in which they are positioned by peers and adults in various play contexts—and children's perceptions of self while engaged in play, among many social factors. The *rhetoric of frivolity* highlights the ambiguity of play in an attempt to explain the ways in which reimagining and reshaping societal conventions lead to new ways of seeing the world. Critical theorists who challenge tacit assumptions about play (e.g., Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Gerlach, Browne, & Suto, 2014) voice the *rhetoric of frivolity*.

In our analysis of the kindergarten curriculum documents in each of the five provinces involved, we identified each of the instances of when the word *play* was used to describe a learning activity or outcome (and not when used in the word *playground* or to describe the role that something plays in learning). We then determined whether the underlying assumptions in the reference to play appeared to

1. describe a learning outcome related to content area concepts or skills (rhetoric of play as progress)
2. refer to children's enjoyment, personal satisfaction, or motivation (rhetoric of the self)
3. refer to creative, imaginative activity (rhetoric of the imaginary)
4. describe the construction of identities within particular social groups (rhetoric of identity)
5. refer to ways in which children shake up conventional understandings and present non-mainstream perspectives (rhetoric of frivolity)

In the following section, we contextualize the views of play within kindergarten curricula in each province by providing a brief history of kindergarten and, where we were able to access them, describing past kindergarten curriculum/program documents. We then present our analysis of the rhetorics of play that seem to underpin objectives, goals, and statements that refer to play within the documents.

### Play in Kindergarten across Five Provinces

We summarize features of kindergarten programs in the five provinces in Table 1 to provide an overview before beginning our province-by-province descriptions of kindergarten histories and rhetorics of play within kindergarten documents.

**Table 1.** Kindergarten program details across five provinces

Province	Full or Half-Day	Schools Must Provide?	Attendance Compulsory?	Entrance Age	Number of Children Attending 2015/2016	Qualifications of Teachers	Early Learning Offered by Province before Kindergarten?
British Columbia	Full	Yes	No	5 years old before December 31	44,641 (in public and independent schools)	Ministry of Education Certificate of Qualification (must have completed a teacher education program)	Yes
Alberta	Funding for half-day but school boards can offer full-day	No	No	5 years old except there is Program Unit Funding (PUF) for children who are identified as mild / moderately delayed or gifted, or are ELL, who may be as young as 3 years of age	67,998	Teacher who plans and assesses must have a BEd—this teacher may supervise an ECE. Most kindergarten teachers have a BEd and teacher certification	No, not universal
Saskatchewan	Half-day every day, or full-day every day/ every other day	No	No	5 years old	13,805	Professional "A" Saskatchewan Teaching Certificate	Yes. Prekindergarten can be offered to 3-to-5-year-olds

Province	Full or Half-Day	Schools Must Provide?	Attendance Compulsory?	Entrance Age	Number of Children Attending 2015/2016	Qualifications of Teachers	Early Learning Offered by Province before Kindergarten?
Manitoba	Half-day	Yes	No	5 years by December 31	14,173 (as of September 30, 2014)	5-year university educated teacher	No, not universal
Ontario	Full-day	Yes	No	4 years old	261,490 (JK and SK)	A Bachelor of Education degree or undergraduate degree and two years teacher education	No

## British Columbia

**History of kindergarten.** Despite the acknowledgment in the early 1900s that kindergarten programs would be valuable for the education of young children, the Province of British Columbia delayed the opening of the first public kindergartens for five-year-olds until 1944. Although the demand for enrolment in these newly established classes in Victoria and Vancouver far exceeded the number of spaces, there was no obligation by other school boards in the province to follow. In 1972, the newly elected New Democratic Party made amendments to the School Act to ensure that every school board provide a “kindergarten experience” for all five-year-olds requesting it (Weiss, 1979). Shortly after, kindergarten was provided in all public and private schools on a part-time basis (2.4 hours per prescribed school day), with special needs, Aboriginal, and English Language Learner students eligible for full-day programming. In 2010, the BC government implemented full-day kindergarten for 50% of all five-year-olds in the province, leading to mandatory full-day kindergarten for every five-year-old by 2011 (BC Ministry of Education, 2010). Currently, a typical kindergarten class cannot exceed 22 children and must be taught by a provincially certified teacher (BC Ministry of Education, 2015c). However, kindergarten teachers are not required to have early childhood education credentials.

**Rhetorics of play in kindergarten curriculum.** British Columbia is in the midst of implementing its Education Plan that focuses on personalized learning and aims to

address the needs of all children and youth (BC Ministry of Education, 2015e). Initiatives for new curricula and assessment guidelines have been published under the document entitled *Transforming Curriculum & Assessment*. We focus on this new document because of the expectation that it is intended as a current guide to curriculum instruction and as a pathway to the future. We address the portions of this document that pertain to kindergarten for the analysis reported here. According to the Ministry of Education website, the guidelines are intended “to remove barriers to personalizing instruction so that the curriculum is optimally manageable for teachers and allows them more freedom to find approaches that work for schools and students alike” (BC Ministry of Education, 2015e, p. 1).

In providing a rationale for BC's Curriculum Transformation Plans, the ministry emphasizes that the new document, rather than restricting student learning to factual content, is intended to *modernize* education by focusing on *how* students learn, not *what* they learn. The new curriculum is divided into three core competencies: communication; thinking; and personal and social. However, the ministry (2015d) also states that “there will continue to be an emphasis in primary grades on the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy ... But with the improved curriculum students will be able to develop a deeper understanding of those subjects and their fundamental concepts” (p. 2). There is no standalone kindergarten curriculum in British Columbia. Kindergarten is included along with the other grades and organized along the traditional subject areas of the arts, English Language Arts, mathematics, and so on. Although *play* is not explicitly conceptualized in any of the new documents, it is implied within the section titled “Big Ideas” that related to inquiry, exploration, and discovery, and there are some play-based instructional examples included across curricular areas. For example, the English Language Arts curriculum for kindergarten states that children will “use play and other creative means to discover foundational concepts of print, oral, and visual texts” (BC Ministry of Education, 2015b, p. 1).

Play is mentioned a handful of times in some subject area curricula. The document also has illustrations of core competencies being actualized where play is also referenced. For the most part, references to play reflect the rhetoric of play as progress. For example, the English Language Arts document states, “Playing with language helps us discover how language works” (BC Ministry of Education, 2015b, p. 1), while the Physical and Health Education document indicates that play contributes to the development of



movement and physical skills. There is far less evidence of the rhetoric of self, the rhetoric of frivolity, the rhetoric of identity, and the rhetoric of the imaginary. For example, to illustrate creative thinking, the following comment from a child who had been working with plasticine figures for more than a month is offered: "I get ideas when I play. I get ideas when I use my senses to explore. My play ideas are fun for me and makes me happy" (BC Ministry of Education, 2015a, p. 1).

Although British Columbia has a long history of play-based kindergarten instruction, play has not been given the same prominence in the new curriculum documents as it has in current supporting documents, such as *British Columbia Early Learning Framework* (BC Ministry of Education, 2008), and *The Primary Program: A Framework for Teachers* (BC Ministry of Education, 2010). Given this lack of explicitness in the more recent "improved" curriculum, we cannot help but wonder if play is no longer viewed as a "modern" way of learning. The more academic language now in use casts play somewhat in the shadows of what we speculate is an intention to be perceived as more scientific and, in the process, more academic and less play-oriented.

## Alberta

***History of kindergarten.*** Kindergartens, identified in curriculum and policy documents as Early Childhood Services, are now under the jurisdiction of school districts in Alberta, but this has not always been the case. Prior to 1980, kindergarten programs were organized and managed by Kindergarten Societies, often being housed in a community centre or church basement. Teachers were not required to have a teaching degree until kindergartens came under the jurisdiction of school districts (Maynard, 2013). Although today kindergarten teachers must have teaching degrees, they are not required to have special early childhood certification or credentials (Alberta Education, 2014/2015).

Most children enter kindergarten at the age of five. Additionally, either on their own or partnering with non-profit agencies, school boards may provide up to three years of Early Childhood Services programming for children, who are at least three years and less than six years of age, and are identified as having mild to moderate disabilities or delays, or as gifted, and also for children who are learning English as a new language.

Kindergarten is not mandatory in Alberta. Because Alberta Education funds a weekly minimum and maximum number of minutes of kindergarten, there is a wide

variation in kindergarten hours across the province, depending on the resources within the individual school districts and the value placed on kindergarten relative to other programs that the school districts provide (Alberta Education, 2014/2015). There is no standalone kindergarten curriculum document. Because kindergarten is one of the grades in each of the elementary subject area curricula, the kindergarten curriculum for each subject area is updated whenever the elementary curricula are updated. The Language Arts K-3 curriculum, for example, is dated 2000, whereas the Fine Arts K-3 curriculum is dated 1985. Each curriculum has general outcomes and specific student expectations presented sequentially, with the expectation that student performance in kindergarten will provide the foundation for their learning in Grade 1 and beyond.

***Rhetorics of play in kindergarten curriculum.*** Although there is no separate kindergarten curriculum document, there is a kindergarten program statement (Alberta Education, 2008), which describes 10 guiding principles for kindergarten programming and brings together the general and specific learner expectations for kindergarten from all the subject area curricula. There are 17 references to play in this document. The rhetoric of play as progress is evident within the reference to play in the guiding principle, “Children are unique and active contributors to their learning” (Alberta Education, 2008, p. 4). Underpinning the kindergarten program is the following understanding:

Purposeful play is an important mode of learning for children. Children at play are highly motivated and capable of intense concentration. Through organized activities and purposeful play, children explore and experiment with their environment. They clarify and integrate information and concepts encountered in their previous experiences. (Alberta Education, 2008, p. 5)

For the most part, among the references to play are the use of the words *dramatic play* and *role-play*. Reflecting the rhetoric of the imaginary, these are expected learning activities within the Creative Expression curriculum area. Additionally, within the Physical Education curriculum there are a few references to *fair play* and in the Personal and Social Responsibility section one of the specific learner expectations includes “a willingness to play alongside others” (Alberta Education, 2008, p. 28), reflecting the rhetoric of identity.

Given that there is little explicit mention of *play* in the subject area curricula, the answer to the question of whether play is at risk in Alberta kindergartens is contingent upon the teachers' pedagogical preferences and knowledge about early childhood learning as they implement the curriculum. Although the kindergarten program statement and kindergarten strands of each subject area curriculum do not emphasize play-based learning, a recently implemented program for childcare centres (Alberta Education, 2015) is play-based. The differences between the two programs highlight a disconnection between the approaches to early childhood education that are taken up in childcare centres and those that are implemented in formal schooling.

## Saskatchewan

***History of kindergarten.*** In the early 1900s, private kindergarten programs were initially offered in Saskatchewan in people's homes or donated spaces in the capital city of Regina. Children's parents paid fees to cover the expenses incurred to offer these programs. A formal kindergarten curriculum for private kindergartens was not created and offered for sale until the late 1950s, since the Saskatchewan Department of Education was first committed to establishing the Grades 1 to 12 system (Kratzmann, 1974). However, "while these schools were periodically checked by superintendents to assure that their facilities were safe, no regulations were imposed to govern the quality of private programs" (Kratzmann, 1974, pp. 3–4).

The School Act in Saskatchewan was amended in 1969 to allow "local boards to establish kindergartens with the proviso that they were to be partially maintained either through tuition fees or local support" (Kratzmann, 1974, p. 4). However, this amendment was repealed when a new political party was elected into power in the province and the Minister's Committee on Education recommended that "publicly supported kindergartens be established" (Saskatchewan Department of Education, 1972, p. 68). Initially, provincially funded pilot projects were initiated in six school sites in order "to provide examples of several alternative means of implementing public kindergartens" (Saskatchewan Department of Education, 1973, p. 2). The Saskatchewan School Act was then amended in 1974 to establish provincially supported kindergartens (Kratzmann, 1974). Today, although most Saskatchewan schools offer a kindergarten program, children's attendance is not mandatory (Government of Saskatchewan, 2012). School divisions offering

kindergarten programs typically offer half-day programs five days a week or full-day programs every other day of the week (Government of Saskatchewan, 2015).

***Rhetorics of play in kindergarten curriculum.*** In its report on the establishment of publicly funded kindergartens, the Minister's Committee on Education appears to have taken up the rhetoric of play as identity:

What appears to be important is that kindergartens avoid the extreme of providing either a totally play-oriented socialization experience or a highly cognitive academic-type program. Although both emphases may be necessary for certain youngsters, a balance of activities would seem to be the most appropriate for the majority of children. (Saskatchewan Department of Education, 1972, p. 7)

Following this report, the first curriculum for provincially supported kindergartens in Saskatchewan, titled *Children First: A Curriculum Guide for Kindergarten*, was published in 1974. It was subsequently renewed in 1978 and again in 1994 (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2011). Provincial curriculum renewal initiatives led to the redevelopment of the kindergarten curriculum in 2010, now titled the *Saskatchewan Curriculum: Kindergarten* (Ministry of Education, 2010). Among the characteristics of an effective kindergarten program is "facilitating inquiry through play" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 11).

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education has also developed a complementary document to the curriculum entitled *Children First: Resource for Kindergarten* (2009). Reflective of the rhetoric of play as progress, this document states that "play is a natural mode of learning and the foundation for the kindergarten program" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 8). It describes play as a vehicle for promoting student inquiry and development across a multitude of areas. This includes providing opportunities for children to "use their imagination, make sense of their world, develop social and cultural understandings, express their thoughts and feelings, use flexible and divergent thinking, develop large and small motor skills, solve real problems, [and] develop language, literacy skills, and concepts" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 8). Play is one of the foundational concepts around which the current kindergarten curriculum has been developed, and is mentioned in the 2010 Kindergarten Curriculum approximately eighty times when describing learning activities and outcomes (Saskatchewan Ministry of

Education, 2010). Underpinned by a number of rhetorics of play (e.g., play as progress, play as identity, and rhetorics of the imaginary), curriculum objectives are very supportive of play in kindergarten classrooms in Saskatchewan.

## Manitoba

***History of kindergarten.*** Manitoba's kindergartens have a robust play-based history that stretches back over 100 years, although in their early days, kindergartens operated as social welfare initiatives. In 1892, a free storefront kindergarten was opened by the Winnipeg Free Kindergarten Association. Trained teachers followed the play-based pedagogical approach of Friedrich Froebel. By 1958, there were kindergartens in all schools in the Winnipeg School Division (Prochner, 2000). The Manitoba government provided grants for kindergarten for the first time in 1967, thereby encouraging all school divisions to establish such programming, and in 1968, it issued the first kindergarten curriculum. Today, every school division across Manitoba offers kindergarten and most children who are five years old by December 31 do attend, although it remains a voluntary program. In 2014/2015, 14,173 children were enrolled in public and independent kindergartens (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014).

***Rhetorics of play in kindergarten curriculum.*** The first kindergarten curriculum (Manitoba Education, 1968) emphasized the *rhetoric of play as the self*, explaining the importance of having

a well-arranged environment that invites exploration in a number of different centres of interest and with a variety of media, toys and materials [and] a variety of activities which provide all children with the opportunity of doing something at which they can succeed. (p. 7)

Today there is no standalone kindergarten curriculum, as kindergarten is included in each subject's curriculum. We observed that *play* is not deeply embedded in these documents, which results in a lack of clarity about how these subjects might be approached through a play-based pedagogy. For example, although there is a page in the overview to the K–4 English Language Arts document devoted to the significance of play, with

statements such as “Play is recognized as an important vehicle for developing all aspects of literacy because it provides a functional, meaningful setting for language development” (p. 9), particular play-based instruction and assessment strategies are rarely shared in this or other subject-specific curricula.

Kindergarten support documents (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008; Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015) more strongly emphasize the role of play, especially through the rhetoric of play as progress: “Learner centredness, purposeful play, inquiry, and a natural/authentic (real-life) learning environment are planned literacy contexts for speaking and listening as children interact with their learning environment, peers, and adults to construct meaning of their world” (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008, p. 5).

The support document *A Time for Learning* was initially published in 1979 and revised and expanded in 1986. However, over time, there was a shift away from the philosophy and practice of play-based learning. Many school boards gradually moved toward more formal approaches to pedagogy and increased the focus on student achievement, print-based literacy and teacher accountability. The updated *A Time for Learning* (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015) is thus especially significant since it reaffirms a play-based pedagogical approach to kindergarten. It addresses the rhetoric of the self, acknowledging the value of children’s play not just for its learning potential but also for fun and enjoyment, recommending “45 minutes to one hour of child-initiated play” per day during the kindergarten year (p. 39).

There are also numerous references to the *rhetoric of the imaginary* in concert with the *rhetoric of play as progress*, as children participate in socio-dramatic play. They are to “engage in literacy and numeracy play as they create shopping lists or take orders in the dramatic play centre; they may ‘pretend’ to read the books that are familiar to them, or use play money to ‘pay’ for their purchases at the store you have set up” (Manitoba Ministry of Education and Advanced Learning, 2015, p. 28). Recommendations for creating kindergarten classroom environments also reflect the rhetoric of the imaginary:

Children learn through play, and the classroom environment offers them choices and opportunities to play with others using all kinds of materials (e.g., sand, water, clay, paint, etc.) and equipment (e.g., musical instruments, balls, etc.) in spaces that evoke their imagination, letting them play in fantasy worlds of castles,

forests, offices, outer space, kitchens, ships, or wherever. (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008, p. 33)

The rhetoric of identity in play-based classrooms is evident in statements describing kindergartens as “places where children wonder, discover, imagine, construct and learn by trial and error so that from their experiences they can develop their own framework of knowledge and a firm sense of self” (Bos & Chapman XV, as cited in Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015, p. 43). Additionally, the rhetoric of frivolity is reflected in statements that encourage teachers to guide kindergarten children to challenge societal tacit assumptions and reshape societal convention. *A Time for Learning* provides this example of how play can make bias visible and how it can be addressed:

An argument broke out when girls wanted to use unit blocks in the centre where a group of boys were already busy building. One boy was especially adamant that the blocks were boys’ toys and the girls could not play. The teacher recognized this opportunity as a teachable moment to introduce the idea of stereotyping and bias. (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015, pp. 294–295)

The absence of a standalone kindergarten curricula and curricula organized around traditional subject areas are two important factors that influenced the lack of a strong emphasis on play in Manitoba. However, the recent renewal and dissemination of *A Time for Learning, A Time for Joy* (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015) is significant since it reanimates the conversation about play-based learning for a new generation of teachers, children, and families. With its emphasis on multiple rhetorics of play, this document has great potential to influence play-based approaches in Manitoba’s kindergarten classrooms in the future, if implementation is properly supported.

## Ontario

***History of kindergarten.*** The first public kindergarten was opened in Toronto in 1883 (Corbett, 1989). By 1887, kindergarten had received official recognition from the Department of Education and was allotted a share in the provincial grant. Public junior kindergarten (children turn four years of age during the year they begin junior

kindergarten) was introduced along with senior kindergarten (children turn five years of age during the year they begin junior kindergarten) in the 1940s (Corbett, 1989).

In the full-day kindergarten program (introduced in some schools in 2010 and fully implemented across the province in September 2014) a kindergarten teacher and a designated early childhood educator collaboratively plan and teach. Kindergarten is not mandatory for children, but school boards are required to provide both junior and senior kindergarten, as well as before-and after-school programs for kindergarten students at schools where at least 20 children's families express an interest (Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, n.d.). In September 2014, kindergarten programs were available to 265,000 children in approximately 3,600 schools across Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 1).

The Ontario Ministry of Education has created five kindergarten program documents since 1944: *Programme for Junior and Senior Kindergarten Classes* (1944), *Kindergarten* (1966), *The Kindergarten Program* (1998), *The Kindergarten Program (Revised)* (2006), and *The Full-day Early Learning Kindergarten Program* (2010/2011). From the very first document, through to the current document (with the exception of the 1998 program), there is evidence that program developers viewed play as integral to children's activity in kindergarten. Given that the word *play* is mentioned in every document (166 times in the most recent one), program developers have continued to send a clear message that children's play is integral to kindergarten activity.

***Rhetorics of play in kindergarten curriculum.*** Early kindergarten programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1944, 1966) were strongly influenced by the rhetoric of the self, with many references to free-play and child-directed play, in an effort "to arouse a spontaneous interest in the environment which finds expression in purposeful constructive effort and to develop interest in other children and enjoyment of their company" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1944, p. 20). The role of teachers, as outlined in the first kindergarten program document, was to create a safe and resource-rich environment for play, but otherwise to allow children's play to unfold without adult interference.

The documents have always been self-contained kindergarten program documents that are not part of the subject-area curricula of the elementary Grades 1–8. The learning expectations in the current document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010/2011) are organized within six areas of learning: personal and social development, language,



mathematics, science and technology, health and physical activity, and the arts. These areas are based on five developmental domains: social, emotional, communication/language, cognitive, and physical. Although the rhetoric of the self that underpinned references to play in early kindergarten program documents has not completely disappeared in the more recent kindergarten program documents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, 2010/2011), the rhetoric of play as progress has supplanted it as the dominant perspective on the role of play in kindergarten. One of the six fundamental principles guiding the *Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten* program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010/2011) has elements of both rhetorics: “Play is a means to early learning that capitalizes on children’s natural curiosity and exuberance” (p. 2). In spite of the dual perspectives highlighted in the statement of principle, more than 75% of the 166 references to play in the 2010/2011 document speak with the voice of the rhetoric of play as progress. For example, a statement explaining the principle identifies many learning outcomes attributed to play:

It has long been acknowledged that there is a strong link between play and learning for young children, especially in the areas of problem solving, language acquisition, literacy, numeracy, and social, physical, and emotional skills. Young children actively explore their environment and the world around them through a process of learning-based play. When children are manipulating objects, acting out roles, or experimenting with various materials, they are engaged in learning through play. Play, therefore, has a legitimate and important role in early learning and can be used to further children’s learning in all areas of the Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten program. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010/2011, p. 13)

There is great hope for play, as conceptualized with the rhetoric of play as progress, to extend beyond kindergartens in the future of Ontario education. Not only is play important in the current kindergarten program document, in a document, *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015), part of the overall action plan for the learning and well-being of Ontario school children is to integrate play into the daily classroom lives in primary grades. Another indicator of renewed and broad support for play is evident in the range of contributors.

The vision document includes input and perspectives from students, parents, educators, system leaders, and community and business leaders.

## Discussion

The prominence of play in kindergarten curricula varies across the five provinces. Likewise, the five rhetorics of play are differentially positioned, although play as progress is dominant across the jurisdictions. In Ontario and Saskatchewan, where there are stand-alone kindergarten curricula, play is mentioned far more frequently than in curricula of British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba, where kindergarten objectives are folded into subject area curricula. Kindergarten curricula that are part of the elementary subject area curricula appear to position kindergarten as preparation for later academic learning in Grade 1 and beyond, placing a downward pressure on kindergarten teachers to emphasize academics in kindergarten and to minimize or push play out of kindergarten activities altogether. These trends have been documented elsewhere (e.g., Anning, 2015; Yelland & Kilderry, 2005) and have created what Dombkowski (2001) identifies as “a professional tug-of-war between education professionals who represented the non-academic or ‘developmental’ kindergarten interests and those who gave priority to the academic goals and didactic methods of the primary school” (p. 532).

Given the well-established relationship between play and learning, as well as in social, emotional, and personal development and identity construction/formation (Moyles, 2015), we argue that play needs to be *pushed up* into higher grades and recognized as a significant way for all learners to make meaning in the world. The Ontario Ministry of Education’s vision statement (2015) mentions the need to extend play beyond the home and kindergarten. This statement is a starting point. We believe that further development of the possibilities for play-based learning in primary grades is needed, both in research and in policy development.

Our analysis of the rhetorics of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) within five Canadian provinces’ kindergarten curricula, current and past, and of some support documents has highlighted other important considerations for curriculum and policy development. We recommend that curriculum documents should:

1. Include a conceptual framework that reflects a more nuanced, less homogeneous conception of play including ability, cultural, economic, gender, and social class differences. Documents also need to make references to play more explicitly and, ideally, emphasize the role of play across the grades and across the life span (see, e.g., Huizinga, 1955).
2. Make more explicit the importance of the role of play not only to children's learning but also to their social and emotional growth.
3. Provide more examples of activities that are not linked to curricular outcomes, in other words, promote play for the sake of play, in addition to play in the service of measurable academic outcomes (see, e.g., Sutton-Smith, 1997).
4. Explicitly recognize the socio-cultural nature of play, acknowledging that conceptualizations of play will vary across the rich diversity of cultural and geographical contexts in Canada (Göncü et al., 1999).

Additionally, given that standalone kindergarten curricula tend to promote play much more prominently, we recommend that kindergarten curriculum documents explicitly reference play and cross-reference relevant sections of supporting documents. We draw on our experiences as teachers and teacher educators, observing that busy teachers tend to consult with and follow curriculum documents to a greater extent than the supporting documents.

## Conclusion

The differential featuring of play in core curriculum documents that are expected to guide curriculum and pedagogy and in supporting documents contributes to a risk that play will not be integrated into kindergarten activities. A lack of references to play in some provinces' curricula, together with an emphasis on the rhetoric of play as progress and a concomitant lack of acknowledgement of other rhetorics of play, contributes to a diminution of the affordances of play in all areas of children's lives. It is important that an academic emphasis be harmonized with the tenets of play as more child-directed, with some choice and space for the imagination (Fleer, 2010; Sandberg & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2011).

Answers to the question of whether play is at risk in Canadian kindergartens depend on a number of factors related to curriculum and pedagogy. The number of

references to play in kindergarten curricula sends a strong message about the importance of play in children's daily kindergarten activity, as do the discourses underpinning those references. An analysis of the curriculum does not provide a complete answer to the question. Whether and how play is taken up in kindergarten classrooms depends on the values, perspectives, and the backgrounds and experiences of the kindergarten teachers who implement the curriculum (Taylor, 2013b; Vartuli & Rohs, 2009). How kindergarten teachers implement the rhetorics of play underpinning the curriculum documents is an important topic for future research. This exploration might include the impact of early childhood education credentials on teachers' implementation of kindergarten curricula; a topic with clear implications for initial teacher-education programs.

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