

# Play related beliefs and practices in Colombia: Implications for Policy & Practice

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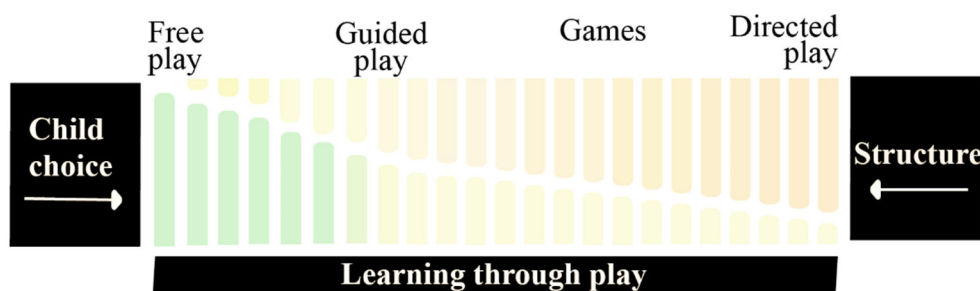
## Summary

Playing is crucial for children's growth and learning, and it is essential to understand and improve the role of educators in facilitating learning through play. This study aimed to investigate the beliefs of early childhood educators in Colombia's aeioTU program about play, which is based on the Reggio Emilia philosophy and focuses on art, projects, exploration, and play. The study revealed that educators perceive play as a fun, social, and interactive activity that allows children to participate actively and exercise agency. They also emphasized the spontaneous and voluntary nature of play, which is closely linked to the exploration processes in the aeioTU educational model. Most educators reported that they set the materials and space for play, guided children when they needed help, or directed activities such as games. The findings suggest that educators see their role at the two extremes of the play facilitator spectrum. Although the aeioTU curriculum recognizes play as a free and unstructured activity in which children have complete freedom to make decisions, the teachers' report suggests a preference for more structured and directed approaches that limit children's agency. The findings provide valuable insights into the educators' practices and can guide decision-making and teacher training efforts in this area. In addition, the findings provide an opportunity to how play is situated in policy.

## Context

### Learning through play

Play is a means to intentionally promote children's learning and development.<sup>i</sup> Although several researchers have defined play, there is less consensus on this concept or on the role of educators as play facilitators. Additionally, a false dichotomy has been maintained between play and learning in which play is understood as an activity of total agency and autonomy in which there can be no learning goals or objectives. Recently, a reference framework has been developed that proposes a continuum or spectrum of play practices in which the role assumed by the teacher, the role of children and the pedagogical intention vary (Figure 1).<sup>ii iii</sup>



*Figure 1. Continuum of practices to promote learning through play (adapted from Jensen et. al., 2017).*

Along this spectrum play can be categorized into four types: free play, guided play, rule-play, and directed play. In free play, children exercise control and agency, while the educator observes, listens, and intervenes only

upon request. Guided play has a pedagogical intention that balances children's autonomy with the teacher's guidance. Games or rule-based play limits children's agency with clear instructions, while the educator explains the rules. In directed play, the teacher has the most control with a defined intention, and children's autonomy is reduced. Different practices along this continuum can support learning in various developmental dimensions. It's important to combine practices to discover children's interests and support different skill development. For example, free play allows children to practice skills they want to master, relate to peers, build friendships, and engage in physical activity. Guided play provides more guidance from adults to achieve specific learning objectives according to each child's needs.

### **Play Facilitation**

To become effective play facilitators, educators must recognize the different roles they can assume, plan for play opportunities, and reflect on the opportunities provided by freer or more structured approaches in relation to different pedagogical intentions. In play, teachers are expected to be sensitive to children's needs and interests, motivate them to get involved, and foster positive and warm relationships among children.<sup>iv</sup> Children's interest in play offers the opportunity to enrich, elevate and reflect. Some studies have found that educators face obstacles when deciding to integrate play practices along the continuum. Of these, the most frequently reported is achieving a balance between structure and child agency and integrating pedagogical intention.<sup>v vi</sup>

### **The Characteristics of Play**

In early childhood education, play has been described as self-directed and voluntary in nature, as well as its link with creativity and imagination. Its exploratory, flexible, and repetitive character has also been highlighted. Zosh. et al. (2018) point to five characteristics of play that help maximize learning and development: active engagement (they are focused and resist distraction), meaningful (there is connection with other experiences and with what they already know and are interested in), fun (they experience positive emotions and joy in discovery), iterative (they explore, repeat, and try), and socially interactive (learning with others and communicating).

### **Play in the Colombian context**

In Colombia, national policy (Law 1804 of 2016) establishes that children develop their potential, abilities and abilities through play, art, literature, and exploration of the environment. A series of pedagogical guidelines and orientations have been defined that seek to ensure quality and guide educational processes.<sup>vii</sup> In these guidelines, play is defined as an end in itself and as a self-regulated and voluntary child activity that encourages the generation of new ideas about the world around them and allows children to give meaning to previous experiences. In play, children are invited to be protagonists, make decisions, solve problems, develop hypotheses, reach agreements and, in general, demonstrate their skills. Despite this, the importance of being directed by children is highlighted and the idea that play should have more specific objectives is rejected, since this leads to its "instrumentalization" and to restricting its potential by turning it "into a directed device, oriented and simplistic that leads to concrete learning within the framework of apparent participation and fun"<sup>viii ix</sup> The role of teacher is defined in terms of organizing the space, carefully observing the children's play and intervening at the right time. In addition, teachers are expected to teach traditional games and rules which are culturally significant.<sup>x</sup>

### **The educational model of aeioTU**

This study was carried out with educators in centers operated by aeioTU. This is a private Colombian foundation that seeks to enhance the development and learning of children in early childhood. At the time of this study, aeioTU operated 18 public centers funded by the ICBF and two private centers that together served more than 51,000 children and their families. The aeioTU curriculum, based on Reggio Emilia pedagogy, recognizes children as protagonists, promotes inclusion, uses play, art, exploration of the medium, and projects as learning strategies, and engages families and communities to weave networks and transform children's lives.<sup>xi</sup>

## Study Design

An objective of the study (among others) was to understand the beliefs that aeioTU educators have about play, their role as facilitators and their practices in the classroom. Two components were included: a large-scale survey and a focused study. In the large-scale study, 306 teachers from 11 schools operated by aeioTU were invited to answer two online surveys that inquired about their pedagogical practices.<sup>xiii</sup> The study started when children were still learning remotely and continued as children returned to in person learning. In the focused study, interviews were conducted, and the pedagogical practices recorded by the teachers from 2 centers were analyzed. All names included in citations have been changed for confidentiality reasons.

## Findings

### The conceptualization of play

Teachers described play as an experience that is meaningful and enables learning, interaction with peers and space, use of imagination and a protagonist role. As children returned to classrooms educators emphasized play as allowing enjoyment and joy.<sup>xiii</sup>

The survey also inquired about the skills and knowledge that children acquire in play. Teachers emphasized play supports developing:

- social and emotional skills
- physical skills
- cognitive skills, including language, math, and scientific thought
- communication.

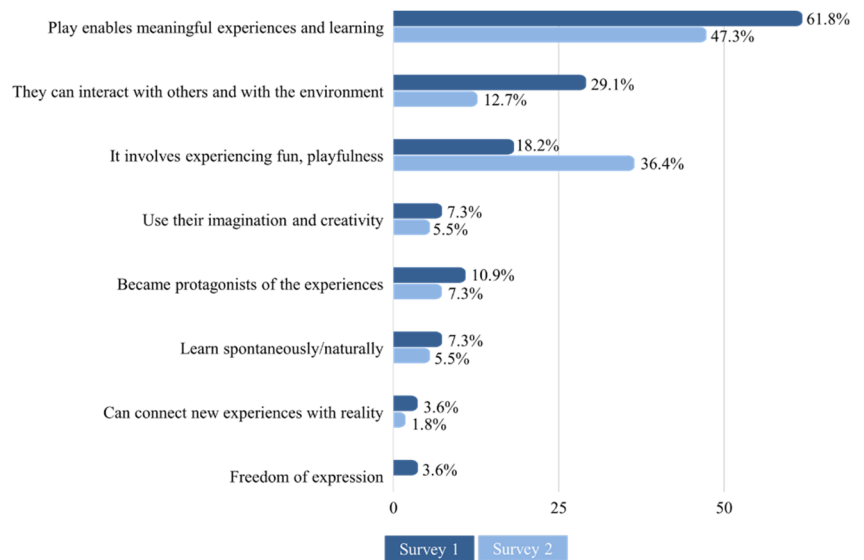


Figure 2. How would you describe what it means for children to learn through play? (N=55)

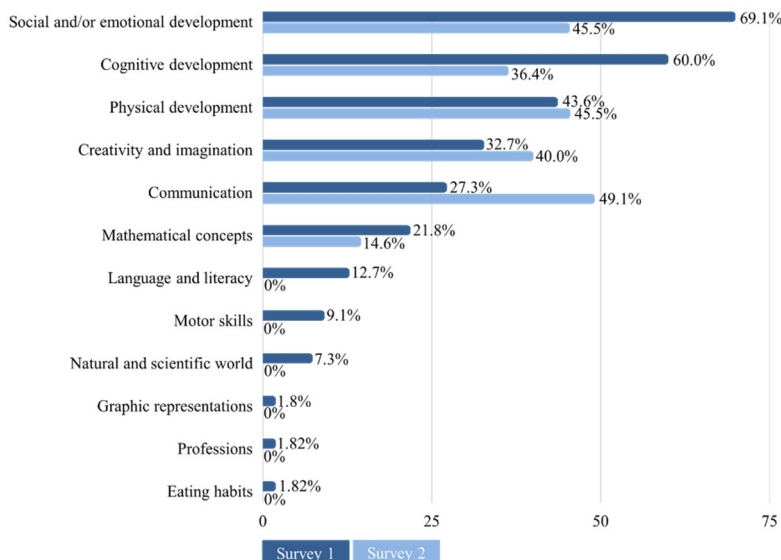


Figure 3. During these play experiences, what do you think children learned or what skills do you think they developed? (N=55)

For teachers, play is a powerful learning strategy that promotes children's development and learning. The educators reported that this strategy is accompanied by a pedagogical intention that guides children to acquire specific skills or knowledge:

*"For me, play is very fundamental (...) because that way children can have fun and learn. So, play leads them to investigate, play, have fun, and share with their peers and teachers.... [It] is very fundamental in my process as a teacher"* (Translation, Interview 3, Claudia, Teacher).

Educators described play as a central component of children's learning and development. They discuss it as a shift from traditional teaching methods towards more dynamic and developmentally appropriate

strategies. In fact, they referred to play as a means to foster joy and fun in learning and recognize its positive impact on children's social interactions and emotional well-being.

*Therefore, play for us as teachers in aeioTU is the transversal pedagogical axis that allows the child (...) to learn more creatively and playfully... Play is the principal axis that helps strengthen, establish, and guarantee that the child [learns] more playfully and appropriately in the development process (Translation, Interview 1, Cristina, Teacher).*

They discuss play as supporting developmental domains, among which are physical, communicative, social-emotional and cognitive, as well as specific skills (e.g., fine motor skills, vocabulary, learning to count).

*Children learned to build and keep agreements, recognize their culture, and strengthen their motor skills by coordinating their body movements when running, throwing, climbing, and jumping, among others (Translation, Survey 1, Nancy, Teacher).*

### Features of learning through play

Teachers were asked to describe what characterizes an experience as play. They referred to:

- pedagogical intentionality,
- being fun and pleasant experience
- active engagement: allowing children to be immersed in experiences, absorbed and motivated,
- allowing exploration,
- socially interactive,
- enabling cooperation and collaboration
- strengthening of relationships between children and adults.

Four additional characteristics emerged in the smaller study. Some teachers mentioned that play allows children to learn naturally.

Since it is immersed in everyday life, children have the possibility to understand the world around them through dynamic and fun activities. They also talked about play as spontaneous. Children have the freedom to select materials and choose space. Teachers also mentioned the voluntary nature of play and how it gives children agency and autonomy to choose what they want to participate in and how they are going to do so. Finally, they referenced play as allowing for imagination and creativity.

*I think of play, within learning strategies, as the fundamental axis for all construction of learning to occur in children. Yes? Because play allows children to construct their learning in a joyful way (Translation, Interview 3, Consuelo, Teacher).*

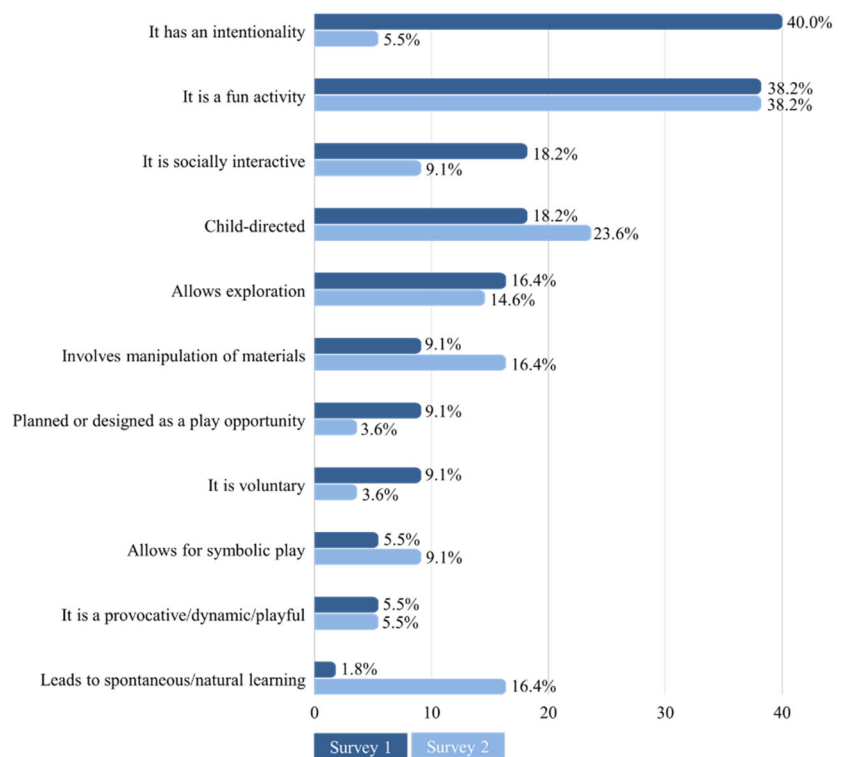


Figure 4. What makes these experiences playful? (N=55)



## Teacher's perceptions of their role as facilitators

Teachers surveyed reflected on their role and how they facilitate and participate in children's play experiences. Most teachers described themselves as play “managers” (Figure 6). Their actions were centered on preparing the space and the conditions for play, arranging materials and resources, creating scenarios to enable interactions, resolving conflict, and helping children when asked to.

Educators also recorded a few classroom activities related to play which were analyzed and categorized by the research team. Results indicate that educators emphasized games with rules and directed play, with children's agency and autonomy being limited. Their role was focused on directing the game or coordinating the experience through the arrangement of materials and the space (Figure 7). The videos showed educators sometime seeking to facilitate learning by scaffolding the playful learning experience.

## Conclusions

The study shows that a recognition of play and its potential to promote child learning and development within this specific pedagogical model that emphasizes play.

However, teachers' conceptualization of their role and their practices mostly emphasized activities at the extremes of the play facilitation spectrum (i.e. free play and directed play). That is, mostly games with rules and directed games, and at the other extreme, free play with teachers providing materials, observing, and accompanying, emphasizing the autonomy and agency of children. These findings may be related to the rigidity of the COVID-19 protocols imposed by the pandemic (e.g., in biosecurity) in managing children's behavior and their movement in classrooms. However, it may also be the result of a national policy that emphasizes free play and traditional games, and that identifies the focus on learning objectives as limiting and impoverishing play.

Play is central to aeioTU and both the pedagogical model and the practices of educators recognize its importance for the development of children. However, additional efforts are needed for educators to broaden their understanding of their role and how to scaffold learning in play activities. It is important that educators not only design a playful space, but also engage as peers and connect playful experiences with specific learning.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

These results solidify the importance of the following:

- Addressing how play is conceptualized in state policy, aligning guidelines with the most recent literature on play. This requires overcoming the play-learning dichotomy and highlighting instead teachers' role in play within a continuum of playful learning practices.
- The development of professional development that focuses on a broader conceptualization of play and that allows educators to situate and reflect on the different roles they can engage in, and their intentionality within playful learning experiences. This requires developing a nuanced understanding of play, overcoming the play-learning dichotomy, recognizing the continuum of practices that facilitate

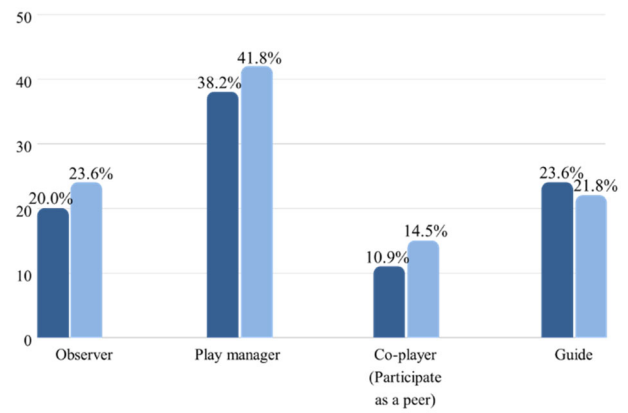


Figure 5. Teacher's role in play opportunities back in the classrooms (N=55)

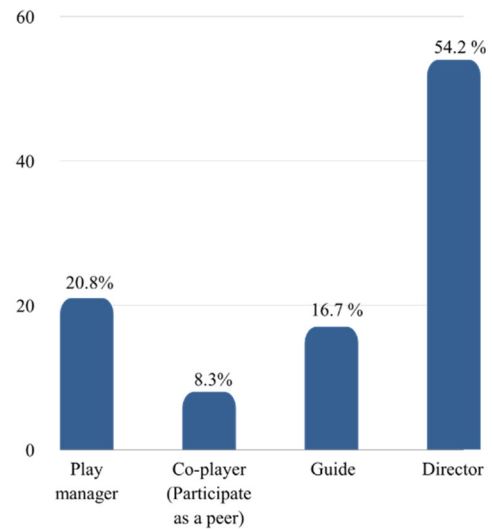


Figure 6. Teacher's role in play opportunities (N=24 play opportunities in 11 classrooms)

learning through play, and recognizing the importance of scaffolding children's learning and development.

- Strengthening continuous improvement practices for educators by incorporating the reflection and observation on their practices and their roles and incorporating the monitoring and evaluation of children's learning and development.

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## About NIEER

The National Early Education Research Institute ("NIEER") of Rutgers University's School of Education develops and disseminates research to inform the country's early childhood education policy and ensure the highest quality processes.

## About the School of Education of the University of Los Andes

The early childhood research group of the Faculty of Education of the Universidad de los Andes has led research on quality in early childhood classrooms in Colombia and has developed evaluation processes on professional development programs aimed at teachers working in early childhood.

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- <sup>xiii</sup> This may be due to the fact that the educators answered the first survey remembering what they did in their pedagogical practice before the pandemic and their answers could be reflect what they rememberd. Another possibility is that the return to the classroom may have been characterized by more restrictive experiences for children due to protocols associated with COVID-19.