A Playful Frame for Primary Schools

Francesca Berti – Free University of Bozen-Bozen, IT
Simone Seitz – Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, IT

1.   Play and Primary School[1]

This volume explores the relationship between primary school and play from an international perspective. Play is widely recognised as a fundamental requirement, a pivotal cultural activity and an essential environment for peer-based socialisation for children of primary school age (Staccioli, 2008; Hamayon, 2016; Petillon, 2015; Sandberg & Heden, 2011). However, discourses and debates on play pedagogy in educational science at an international level (Bubikova-Moan, Næss Hjetland & Wollscheid, 2019; Pyle, De Luca & Daniels, 2017) predominantly focus on kindergarten with relatively few references to primary school education. Consequently, there is less research and knowledge on the latter regarding the integration of play within its setting (Paatsch et al., 2024).

Play is generally recognised as a fundamental form of child expression, and its contribution to personal development and the acquisition of relational competencies is acknowledged (Petillon, 2017). It is therefore important to consider how this manifests within primary schools, where children must negotiate social roles as peers and students, and educational processes are less free from teleological orientations (Seitz & Hamacher, 2024). At the same time, at an international level, childhood is increasingly being spent in institutions, and it is foreseeable that all-day education formats, in particular, will

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1   The present paper is the result of joint research by the two authors. Both authors contributed to sections 1 and 2. Sections 3 and 4 are attributed to Francesca Berti.

become a decisive instance of socialisation for children of primary school age (Schüpbach & Lilla, 2019).

In the current discourse, when the relationship between childhood and primary school is made relevant, play is no longer contrasted with learning in a polarising way but is instead identified as a fundamental or anthropologically-given approach to exploring the world (Briggs & Hansen, 2014). This perspective echoes Dewey's philosophical considerations on education, in which as he was the first to recognise that play and work are based on the same fundamental, activity-based form of acquiring knowledge. He emphasised that play remains a primary form of experience — and therefore of education — even during the primary school years (Dewey, 1938).

In this introductory contribution, and based on these considerations, we align ourselves with approaches to play that do not consider play-based learning to be an "add-on" or a "complementary" teaching and learning method, but rather as a "way of doing" (Paatsch et al., 2024, pp. 71–72) with transformative potential for primary schools as institutions. Moreover, we propose integrating playfulness into education (Berti, Consalvo & Seitz, 2025).

We start from the assumption that children's opportunities for action and participation are interconnected with different forms of play and playfulness. This suggests that education and play are not opposites (Wood, 2022; Wilders & Woods, 2023, p. 18) but can complement each other (Hauber & Zander, 2020; Seitz, Consalvo & Berti, 2025). At the same time, we recognise that the main constraints in merging play and learning in primary schools, as often reported in the literature (Zosh et al., 2017; Weisberg et al., 2016; Farnè, 2005), are diffuse uncertainties that create frictions on the part of researchers and teachers alike. For example, it could be argued that play is a voluntary activity chosen by the individual, a quality that could be lost within the regulations and requirements of the school institution. Alternatively, it could be claimed that performance-enhancement objectives do not compel play.

Still, it is precisely from this sceptical starting point that we invite the reader to consider the relationship between play and primary schools — that is, between play and learning — as a fruitful one. In other words, we propose that they are not antinomic, but rather complementary, enriching each other and providing valuable insights for future conceptualisations of primary education. Indeed, both entail exploration and discovery as fundamental

modes of experience. Furthermore, both "deep" play and learning manifest in moments of flow: states of immersive concentration and intrinsic motivation (Seitz & Hamacher, 2024).

For educators, embracing a playful approach to learning requires trust in the potential of the playful framework, as well as openness to one's own teaching. The outcomes of playful learning cannot be fully programmed because they open up moments of encounter and observation of the world for both children and teachers (Biesta, 2022). From this perspective, play can contribute significantly to educational quality as a vehicle of "world-centred education": it is a valid way to develop high-quality primary education in a changing world (Biesta, 2022).

When it comes to play in a school context, though, theories and definitions such as play-based learning (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Hassinger-Das et al., 2017) and playful learning and guided play (Zosh et al., 2017; Hassinger-Das et al., 2017) reflect pedagogical traditions. There is also no definitional consensus on a broader play-based pedagogy (Paterson, 2020). Furthermore, given the variety of approaches, there is a lack of comprehensive theoretical frameworks considering not only playful teaching and learning in the primary school context but also considering the school as a playful space for experiences and relationships (Berti, Consalvo & Seitz, 2025; Petillon, 1993). A broad perspective integrating play and playfulness within primary education should thus consider three key dimensions: playful spaces, teachers' perceptions, and children's perceptions.

2.   Quest for a Broad Research Perspective

The concept of a playful space draws inspiration directly from kindergarten, an environment dedicated to play where play is recognised as the primary mode of learning. In relation to primary school, this context is seldom applied, but Pyle and Daniels' extensive investigations have generated a model called "A Continuum of Play-Based Learning" (Pyle & Daniels, 2017; Pyle, De Luca & Daniels, 2017; see also Schnuck, 2021; Berti & Seitz, 2024). Consisting of five steps — from free play to educational games — the model provides a comprehensive view of the kindergarten as a playful space and nurtures fur-

ther conceptual reflection on levels of children's self-government and the role of the teacher in supporting activities that are more or less directed by adults or developed together with children. The model concerns children aged 3–6, and it would be valuable to consider it within the context of primary schools as well, since the model provides an opportunity to explore how an extensive and varied range of play activities could be incorporated into primary schools. Similarly, Zosh et al. (2018) – referring more generally to young children, thus including the first years of primary school – propose a spectrum of play activities: free play, guided play, games, cooperative play, playful instruction and direct instruction. In this model, too, the six categories focus on whether the experience is initiated or directed by the child or adult (p. 4). However, even though the degree of guidance is a fundamental consideration when reflecting on playful activities at school, it does not necessarily directly impact the level of children's participation, which can be high even in activities that are heavily directed by adults, as demonstrated by educational games (Seitz & Hamacher, 2024).

A second dimension to consider when reflecting on play and playfulness in primary schools is teachers' perceptions of their own practices and how they reflect on them (Berti, Consalvo & Seitz, 2025; Petillon & Flor, 1997; Seitz, Consalvo & Berti, 2025). Teachers' attitudes towards play are indeed shaped by the pedagogical principles that underpin their daily educational practices. These ideas are not abstract; the way in which play is conceived translates into the teaching practices, attitudes, and learning tools that teachers choose. As Sandberg and Heden (2011) point out that teachers' beliefs implicitly reflect their ideas about the role of play in developmental and socialisation processes (p. 318). They perceive play as a space in which children can explore rules, roles, and relationships, thereby developing the ability to navigate complex social contexts. One shared belief is that learning awareness — the moment when a child realizes they have learnt something — is one of the most authentic forms of motivation, activating a virtuous spiral that fuels curiosity and the desire for more knowledge, as well as a sense of effectiveness. In this context, teachers recognise that activities such as experimentation, exploration, and independent discovery are expressions of playfulness (Sandberg & Heden, p. 324). Nevertheless, some teachers admit that they rely on play activities much more than initially thought, revealing the relational

and conflictual nature of the concept itself (p. 327). These tensions and recurring uncertainties give rise to a fundamental question: could play, in its most generative and transformative form, occupy a much larger space in everyday school life if it were legitimised as a professional practice and supported by an institutional context that recognised its pedagogical value?

If this perspective were fully recognised, it would open up a whole range of aspects relating to playful teaching and learning. For example, it would reveal the need for play literacy as a foundation for acknowledging learning opportunities in playful activities and games within one's own teaching practice. This would limit the widespread belief in the inherent effectiveness of play-based learning (Andreoletti, Tinterri & Dipace, 2024).

If attention to teachers' perspectives and strengthening their professionalism through a playful approach are essential for significantly including play in primary schools, the views of children and the contribution of Childhood Studies should also be taken into consideration (Melton et al., 2014). Literature already emphasises that the main motivation of primary school children for attending school is to socialise with friends and develop peer relationships (Petillon, 1993; Biffi, 2011). Play and playfulness therefore shape the way children engage with school. However, further investigation of children's primary school attitudes and experiences related to play is needed to gain a better understanding of the dimensions of wellbeing and playful learning, given that exploratory studies have already shown that children tend not to separate play from learning when describing activities that stimulate and engage them (Seitz & Hamacher, 2024; Seitz, Berti & Hamacher, 2023).

3.   Thinking Through a Playful Frame

The aim of this volume, and in particular this introductory contribution, is to stimulate further research into the role of play in primary schools by exploring the concept of the "playful frame" from a theoretical perspective (Bateson, 1979; Pearce, 2024). In the words of Bateson:

> Let us place these data in a wider theoretical frame. Let us do a little abduction,
> seeking other cases which will be analogous to play in the sense of belonging

> under the same rule. Notice that play, as a label, does not limit or define the acts that make up play. Play is applicable only to certain broad premises of the interchange. In ordinary parlance, "play" is not the name of an act or action; it is the name of a frame for action. (Bateson 1979, p. 139)

For Bateson (1979, p. 142), abduction is a way of thinking and a method of identifying cases that adhere to the same rules despite their differences. The aim is to find rules and results that rebuild and expand initial premises. According to his epistemology, identifying potentially similar patterns through abduction by placing two objects, events or phenomena side by side requires narrative thinking. It is only through narrative thinking that the logic of our reasoning can take an "imaginative leap". John Dewey also uses the metaphor of a "leap" in *How We Think* (1933), suggesting that the entire process of thinking involves an inference. Implies a "leap", a "shift", or "going beyond" what is known towards something else that is considered equally valid (Dewey, 1933, p. 19). The strong resemblance between Bateson's abduction and Dewey's inference arises from the fact that both authors draw on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of pragmatism. For both authors, thinking begins with the search for similarities and relationships that stimulate the imagination and offer a variety of possibilities and combinations.

Keeping this in mind, we invite readers to explore the publication through the prism of abduction. Rather than thinking about play as an act in itself, readers of this publication can consider it as a playful frame encompassing the full spectrum of playfulness, well-being, discovery and flow. Accordingly, rather than focusing on educational games per se, this volume explores how teaching and learning can be framed in a playful context to stimulate children's motivation and curiosity, thereby setting in motion an active and creative learning process (Sandberg & Heden, 2011, p. 319). The following reference model could be used to represent a playful framework for primary schools:
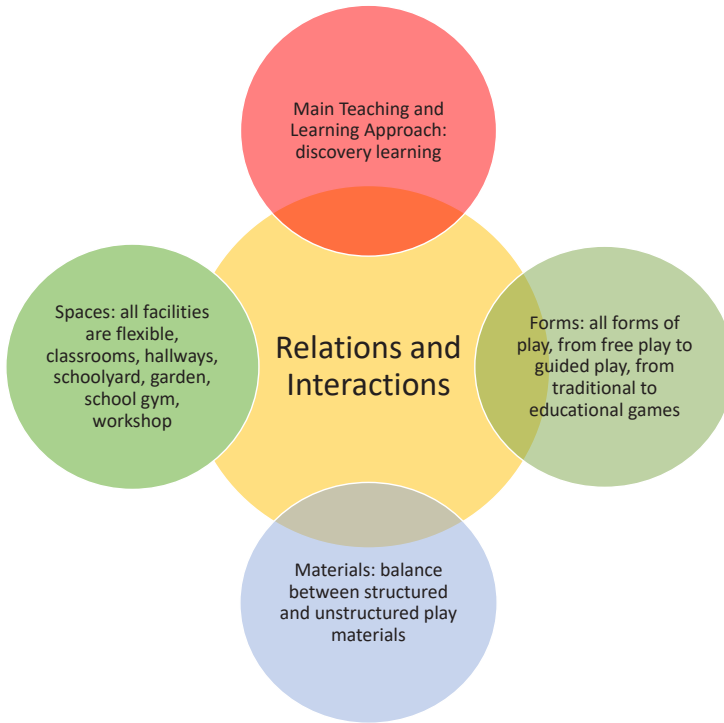
Figure 1 – A playful framework for primary schools

The model comprises four interconnected macro areas relating to the relationships and interactions between adults and children, and between children themselves. Regarding the approach to teaching and learning, we recommend maintaining the focus on discovery-based learning, which has already been implemented in primary schools and is therefore appropriate for a playful setting. In other words, we are not proposing the adoption of a distinct play-based approach or a taxonomy of play in relation to achieving learning objectives, particular subjects or acquiring competencies. Instead, we propose an integrated approach that facilitates the conceptualisation of discovery learning through a "playful" lens. This approach enables children to acquire a range of transversal skills, including both disciplinary and relational and emotional competencies. The playful framework also encourages reflection on competition and cooperation, as well as on individual and group contributions, reflecting the various forms of play.

All forms of play fall within the framework of playful learning. We recognise the following types of play: free play, guided play, and traditional forms of play, such as street and playground games, which form part of an informal learning context, such as children's play culture (Berti, 2023; Duncan & Duncan, 2023).

These include street and playground games, which are part of an informal learning context such as children's play culture (Berti, 2023; Duncan & Arnott, 2019). We also recognise structured games, which are characterised by rules and generally have educational objectives. These include fiction and storytelling, socialising, cooperation and sports.

A variety of materials are also required for the various types of play, ranging from structured materials such as play equipment and set games to unstructured materials that encourage children's free exploration and discovery (Berti & Seitz, 2024; Seitz & Berti, 2023). In this context, the entire school may be viewed as constituting a play frame. Classrooms, corridors, the gym, and the courtyard are all potential playgrounds and fields of exploration.

4. The Present Volume

Adopting a broad perspective on primary schools and play, this volume brings together a series of blind peer-reviewed contributions originating from the "Scuola Spazio Ludico/Schule als Spielraum/School as a Playful Space" Conference, held at the Faculty of Education of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy, in November 2023.

The volume is divided into five sections, each of which invites the reader to reconsider primary school as a playful, fertile and transformative space by encouraging them to think outside the box. These sections are not intended as rigid compartments, but rather as intertwining thematic trajectories offering theoretical perspectives, practical experiences and methodological suggestions.

1. Conceptual Frameworks: This introductory section provides the theoretical tools necessary to understand playfulness as an epistemological and pedagogical concept.

2. Wellbeing at School: A reflection on wellbeing as an intrinsic quality of the school experience, closely connected to playfulness, motivation and participation.
3. Forms of Playful Learning: an exploration of various playful approaches to learning, including open teaching, exploratory learning and collaborative design.
4. Narrative Play and Storytelling: A detailed examination of the value of narration as an educational and relational tool that supports processes of meaning, identity, and playful learning.
5. Best Practices: A brief overview of school initiatives and research ideas, outlining potential scenarios for a more playful educational environment.

One of the challenges of this volume was to collect contributions mainly from German and Italian traditions and translate them into English, with the aim of encouraging greater scientific collaboration. It was necessary to acknowledge that play studies, initiated in the 1930s by the historian Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*, remain a somewhat obscure field of research that is not widely recognised as a discipline in its own right. The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, play is interdisciplinary, covering subjects such as anthropology, history, philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, mathematics, computer science and biology. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, play is elusive. Furthermore, specialist lexicons are not always easy to compare. Without a 'shared encyclopaedia' from linguistic and semiotic perspectives (Eco, 1984), it is challenging to develop a taxonomy that can systematically organise theoretical reflections on and practices of play in schools.

If we cannot use the word "play" without triggering conventional thinking, attempts to classify games or forms of play at school will also be limited. It is as if something slips through the cracks of a rigorous methodology and we ourselves become involved in play. Indeed, engaging in discourse about play leads to engaging in play itself. And so, as in Borges's famous "Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge", we too are tempted to agree that:

> Animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those

that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush, (I) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance. (Borges, 1942/1964)

In other words, we oscillate between a desire for scientific rigour and imagination, as if we were at the mercy of play itself. "This is play", observes Bateson, meaning that multiple dimensions are simultaneously at stake within play. He explains play in terms of metacommunication, which has two levels of abstraction and relates negative statements to other negative meta-statements (Bateson, 1979, as cited in Berti, 2023). Such ambiguity is also noted by Sutton-Smith (1997). So, embracing a fully embodied approach (Biesta, 2022) to play and playfulness, this book aims to stimulate further research and conceptual developments on the relationship between play and primary school.

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