

Dance of the Stick: Relationships With Children in Early Childhood Settings

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Abstract

This study explores the relationships that emerged during outdoor play in an early childhood education setting. Over four months, collaborations deepened through playful encounters and co-constructed learning among children and educators, in nature. Natural materials shaped the play, and traditional hierarchy dissolved as children took the lead, inviting educators into their imaginative worlds. Through observation, documentation, and reflection, the action research illuminated the nuances of children's behaviors, motivations, and preferences. Weekly outdoor "dances" fostered curiosity, development, and discovery. The findings suggest that when educators release control, they rediscover joy and embrace a negotiated curriculum that centers play and honors each child's unique capabilities.

Introduction

My visit with the children began as usual—preparing the outdoor environment for play. The educators and I had collected several tree branches which we wove together into a structure with other sticks strewn freely around the play yard. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a college student on practicum and a child engaging with a stick [see Figure 1: The Dance]. The child followed the student around the play yard with the stick. The student walked backwards with a smile on her face. At first, the child's stick simply followed her, but then, she reached out to hold the stick. The student and the child laughed as he pushed the stick closer and with more force. The dance was one of turn taking, where the student pushed the stick back to the child and the child then pushed it back to her. Back and forth went the stick with laughter and delightful smiles between them. (Researcher account)



Fig. 1: The Dance

In early learning and childcare settings, building trusting relationships between children and educators creates a strong community of learning. Makovichuk et al. (2014) define an optimal early childhood community in which “people are in relationships that encourage growth, creativity, innovation, problem solving, and progress, as people come together and pool their individual perspectives, wisdom, strengths, and skills” (p. 51). This paper examines how trusting relationships with children were built and strengthened when the educators surrendered their lead in play episodes. Moreover, the paper posits that the outdoor environment creates conditions that make the transformation of relationships between children and educators possible. The unpredictable nature of experiential outdoor play invites a dissolution of hierarchy, allowing more equitable and collaborative interactions to emerge. Prins et al. (2022) agree that the educator holds a significant role in outdoor play: “The motivation and the capacity to be taught by the world is not totally innate. It needs to be nurtured and sustained by adults” (p. 4). In early learning and childcare settings, some educators may employ a pedagogy of a “top down” (Jobb, 2019) approach where children’s voices are silenced. Murray (2019) describes the consequences of not listening to children:

If we do not listen actively and attend to each child’s voice, we convey to the child and others that we do not value the child’s perspective, and ultimately, that we do not value the child. By choosing to act in this way, we teach children to be undemocratic: they learn that the individual’s view is not important for the group. (p. 3)

In this study, the researcher illustrates how educators moved away from a top-down pedagogy by deeply listening to the children, following their play interests, and actively engaging alongside them. In the examples presented, children assumed leadership in their own playful learning, with educators supporting and extending investigations. The benefits for children become evident when the adults engage playfully, listen attentively to their ideas, and value their emerging theories (Dietze & Kashin, 2023). Through these reciprocal and joyful exchanges, relationships and trust are strengthened, fostering children’s social and emotional growth (Blewitt et al., 2021). Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) argued that educators should abandon rote learning and other inappropriate teaching methods, allowing children to learn naturally through play (Clarke, 2023).

The concept of attunement is aligned with relationship building. Foran et al. (2021) draw on Heidegger’s (2001) view that attunement requires a primary focus. In this context, it is the child. Heidegger’s notion of attunement refers to adults intentionally maintaining a “relational attitude,” choosing to focus on the child despite potential distractions, stresses, and responsibilities. When educators demonstrate responsiveness to the child and are “in tune” with a child’s moods and behaviors (Swim, 2017), trusting relationships are more likely to emerge.

Through such attunement, the child becomes the composer of their play and learning. Play then becomes an entry point for educators into the child’s world, if they are willing and able to listen. Rinaldi’s seminal work (2001) reminds us that a pedagogy of listening enables multiple perspectives to be shared and mutual respect to be cultivated (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). While relationships between children and educators take time to develop, a key factor is educators’ willingness to value and engage meaningfully in play with children (Clarke, 2023).

In this action research study, as the early childhood educators and the researcher played outdoors with the children, the children's natural confidence in leading the way emerged because they were given the opportunity to do so. The adults refrained from controlling or directing the playscape; instead, they created space for the children to lead and followed their cues through playful, reciprocal exchanges.

The concept of child-led pedagogy is theoretically supported in early childhood frameworks across Canada (OECD report, 2021). Educators are encouraged, but not mandated, to align their practice with the guiding principles outlined in their respective provincial frameworks (OECD report, 2021). Within the context of this study, educators engaged with and worked to implement the principles of the Alberta Curriculum Framework, *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* (Makovichuk et al., 2014) in their daily practice. The shift toward a child-led pedagogy requires time, reflection, and sustained effort. Jobb (2019) highlights the complexities of power dynamics in early childhood education, noting that although there has been a philosophical and pedagogical movement away from teacher-directed approaches toward child-centered orientations, "there remain questions as to where power is located and how shifting orientations may continue to reinscribe hierarchical notions of power" (p. 212). While shifting power to the children may seem idealistic, when educators truly view children as capable and competent, this ideal becomes attainable by creating conditions for authentic, trusting relationships to flourish (Government of British Columbia, 2019).

Each week, the educators and the researcher observed and documented how children expressed their knowledge and theories within the prepared outdoor environment. Makovichuk et al. (2014) emphasize that dispositions to learn are not taught to children; however, what educators do matters. When you respond to each child's dispositions to learn—extending and expanding their playing, seeking, participating, persisting, and caring, you value and acknowledge each child's learning potential (p. 118). When educators engage in critically improvised play experiences that respond to children's actions and interactions with the outdoor environment, opportunities arise to share and redistribute power. Gibson's 1979 theory of affordances, as discussed by Sandseter et al. (2020), describes outdoor environments as spaces that invite children to interpret materials, special arrangements, and natural elements in their own unique ways through play and movement. In this study, the children communicated their ideas through both action and interpretation of materials, and educators were faced with a choice to acknowledge and build upon those or to overlook them. The educators chose the former, responding with playfulness and offering their own ideas back to the children, thereby co-constructing meaning, and deepening relationships.

In early learning and childcare settings, power is typically held by adults, who make decisions regarding, but not limited to, schedules, curriculum, play materials, and the design of both indoor and outdoor environments. As a result, children often have limited agency, with few opportunities for their ideas to be heard or acted upon within the very spaces and places in which they are entangled (Jobb, 2019). Deconstructing adult-held power in early learning and childcare settings requires deliberate attention to play environments, particularly outdoor spaces, which can play a vital role in levelling hierarchical structures. Educators must cultivate an awareness of these power imbalances to effectively create environments where children can assert themselves. In a study by Smith (2018), the researcher

highlighted the significance of outdoor play environments for children's social and emotional development. Smith found that when environments were intentionally prepared with open-ended materials, children were empowered to make decisions, resulting in increased creativity, focus, emotional regulation, and social competence.

When educators pay careful attention to both what exists in the outdoor play environment and what might be added, children are more likely to engage in deeper learning (Dietze & Kim, 2021). Thoughtful and intentional planning can contribute to the deconstruction of power as it "seeks to transform the taken-for-granted (e.g. representations of childhood) into the problematic through the revealing of power, competing interests, and conceptual or theoretical privilege (e.g. underpinning the representations)" (Lam, 2008). Nolan & Lamb (2019) note that educators are expected to provide learning environments that allow children the freedom to explore, problem solve, and create, while simultaneously maintaining self-awareness of their own judgments and influence on each child's learning. The researchers frame this reflective approach as recognizing that "educators with a social justice outlook are acknowledged as believing in the capacity of all children to succeed" (p. 1). In Derrida's (1992) seminal work, the concept of justice is closely tied to the deconstruction of power relations, emphasizing the importance of examining and challenging established hierarchies. Further, Derrida indicates:

That is what gives deconstruction its movement, that is, constantly to suspect, to criticize the given determinations of culture, of institutions, of legal systems, not in order to destroy them or simply to cancel them, but to be just with justice, to respect this relation to the other as justice. (p. 18)

For Derrida (1992), power relations are not eliminated; rather, roles can be reversed allowing the "Other" to be treated with respect and justice. Applied to early learning and childcare, this perspective calls for educators to critically rethink their traditional power over children.

Examining the early learning and childcare setting to uncover where power resides requires educators to reflect on whether they truly believe children deserve agency. When educators embrace a capability approach, where they recognize that children can make choices about their own play and learning (Nolan & Lamb, 2019), power can then be shared or deconstructed in a Derridean sense. In this study, educators enacted this approach by co-planning experiences with the children, providing diverse materials (natural and human-made), asking open-ended questions, engaging in play alongside the children, and relaxing the schedule to respond to children's cues.

Within this early learning and childcare community, the educator team adapted and shifted their approach each week in responses to the children. The dance of teaching and learning evolved and transformed as trust between educators and children deepened. Positions of power shifted as children took the lead in play experiences. Research supports that a distributed model of leadership is effective in early learning and childcare. Clarkin-Phillips (2011) notes that distributed leadership occurs when multiple educators share responsibilities and leadership, influencing children's "dispositions to inquire" (p. 3). In the setting examined in this study, leadership extended to the children, who demonstrated and guided the educators through their play and learning. The outdoor environment, rich with natural

and found materials, provided children with opportunities to express their ideas through their action and play, signaling a shift in power relations. Jobb (2019) describes the environment as distinct from a mere space, emphasizing it as “imbued with fluidity, embodied and enacted power relations, and to advance the idea of possibilities for reconceptualizing power relations in place” (p. 214). Through their play stories, the children revealed both their connection to the outdoor environment and their individual interests, further highlighting the emergent and negotiated nature of power in the setting.

To understand why the *dance of the stick* occurred, the researcher emphasizes how learning and collaboration were achieved. Building positive and respectful relationships with young children was a key factor, alongside maintaining a flexible schedule responsive to children’s outdoor play. Clarke (2023) notes that when young children are given opportunities for unscripted, uninterrupted play, they are better able to make meaningful connections.

During these play experiences, children invited adults to join their joyful endeavors. The outdoor environment was intentionally prepared with both natural and human-made materials, offering multiple opportunities for collaboration to those willing to engage. Educators demonstrated curiosity in the children’s play while valuing and emphasizing outdoor planning that was guided by children’s interests. This reciprocal engagement accelerated the development of trust. Tonge et al. (2018) highlight that when early learning and childcare centers provide children with more time in outdoor environments, higher-quality interactions are reported. They note that

recognizing the influence of the quality as well as the quantity of the time spent outdoors is critical. The need for deliberate planning of time, experiences, interactions and intentional teaching in outdoor environments is essential and has the potential to influence the quality of interactions in the environment and subsequently child experiences and outcomes. (p. 39)

Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of intentional, flexible, and responsive outdoor planning in fostering meaningful interactions, trust, and rich learning experiences for children.

The adults developed a *dance of relationship* with the children, while the more-than-human world offered numerous gifts of materials, weather, vegetation, animals, and insects. Regular access to natural spaces, both wild and managed, should be a foundational aspect of early learning and childcare. Contact with natural environments has been identified as a key pathway for fostering children’s connection to nature, and engaging in physical and adventurous activities outdoors further strengthens this connection (Barrable, 2019). The *dance of the stick* exemplifies the relationship between child, educator, and a natural material. The stick itself was approached as a friendly and inviting material, rather than a threat or hazard, highlighting the collaborative interplay between children, educators, and the more-than-human world.

Methodology

Action research was employed as the methodology for investigating children's outdoor play due to its practical, participatory, and iterative nature. This approach provided a unique opportunity to actively engage with the participants, including children, educators, and families, allowing them to be empowered as active agents in shaping their own play experiences. By examining practice as it occurs and connecting theoretical understandings with lived experience, action research enabled a deeper exploration of the complex dynamics influencing outdoor play, including environmental design, social interactions, and educational practices (Aras & Merdin, 2020).

The methodology's flexibility also allowed for real-time adjustments and interventions, ensuring that findings were relevant and immediately applicable to the study context, thereby contributing to the enhancement of children's outdoor play experiences. Action research emphasized a qualitative, reflexive approach rather than relying solely on quantitative data or preconceived hypotheses. Through ongoing observation, documentation, reflective discussion, and inquiry, the nuances of children's play behaviors, motivations, and preferences were captured, while the participants' perspectives were authentically represented (Lachuk et al., 2020).

This approach fostered trust and a sense of ownership among participants, supporting collaborative problem-solving and the development of new strategies within the early childhood setting (Lufungulo et al., 2021). In contrast to traditional perspectives that often view outdoor play as a space primarily for expending energy, this study positioned outdoor interactions as rich learning experiences (Dietze & Kashin, 2019). The cycle of action research as outlined in Figure 2, comprised of action, observation, reflection, and planning, provided a structured framework to examine these interactions and adapt practices accordingly (Oosthuizen, 2002).

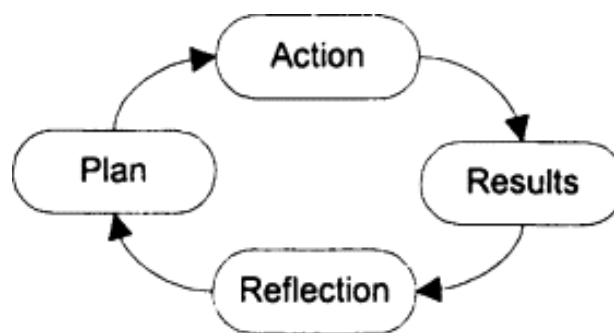


Fig. 2: A typical action-research cycle (Oosthuizen, 2002)

Clarke (2023) explains the expected outcome of action research is a change in one's approach to practice. When educators engage in sustained reflection and critically dwell upon their actions, transformation becomes possible.

The *dance of the stick* incident offered a moment of heightened awareness and a recognition of the power of relationships in action. As Mortari (2015) notes, “In the frame of the postmodern paradigm, reflective analysis of one’s heuristic experience is assumed, whatever the subject matter of inquiry, as essential for the validity of the research” (p. 2). Through reflection, the educators came to appreciate that the relationships formed during this experience were the result of collaborative effort. The child led, and the adult willingly surrendered power. Mortari further emphasizes that “reflective practice is essential in research, since it aims at raising a thoughtful eye on oneself, which allows the subject to gain self-awareness” (Dahlberg et al., 2002, as cited in Mortari, 2015, p. 3). This reflective awareness reinforced the educators’ understanding that authentic learning emerges when power is shared and children are positioned as capable leaders in their own play and inquiry.

The *dance of the stick* story provides an example of the many collaborations that emerged within this early learning and childcare setting. The educators intentionally reflected on power relations in early learning and childcare and chose to honor and embrace the children’s play interests, which led to a joyful culture of play and learning. As Morley (2008) explains, “Critical reflection therefore brings into question how we know what we know and aims to transform our ways of knowing” (p. 268). In doing so, the educators deepened their understanding of how critical reflection can reframe pedagogy, moving it from a position of control to one of collaboration and reciprocity.

Over a four-month period, four different educators created documentation and play proposals that were offered to the children. The early childhood education student completing a practicum was included. The documentation was pedagogical in nature, incorporating photographs and video alongside written reflections and theoretical quotations to support meaning-making. Pedagogical documentation serves “to make the learning processes and life of children and adults in pre-schools and early childhood centers visible, as a basis of reflection and decisions for further actions” (Carlsen & Clark, 2022, p. 202). This documentation was shared with the children, families, and educators, offering the wider community insight into the play and learning taking place. This process encouraged ongoing reflection about the experiences, aligning with Mortari’s (2015) view that “reflexivity, invoked in almost every qualitative research work, is conceived of as a practice that a researcher should carry out to make the politics of research transparent” (p. 1). In this way, reflexivity became both a research tool and a pedagogical practice, deepening the authenticity and transparency of the inquiry.

Children were provided with play materials based on their interests and, in turn, made decisions, asserted their ideas, and expressed creativity, innovation, and imagination. The outdoor environment, through its changing weather, seasonal conditions, and both found and natural materials, contributed significantly to the play experiences. The educators engaged in continuous team reflection to determine next steps for planning a playful, thought-provoking environment. However, to truly shift the power dynamic to the children, *reflection in the moment* was essential. As Dietze and Kashin (2023) note, “Professional dispositions become a way in which early learning students and teachers exhibit their professional practice. They have been called habits of mind. Critical thinking is one of many dispositions” (p. 480). Acting upon children’s ideas as they emerge requires educators to embody these dispositions by professionals honoring children’s play as a foundation for meaningful, reciprocal learning.



Fig. 3: Planks as skis

Discussion and Findings

The *dance of the stick* story provides a metaphorical example of how an equitable community was formed in this early learning and childcare setting. The stick represents an exchange of power and control, with no barriers to participation in play. Regardless of one's age, gender, background, race, or language, acceptance and belonging were experienced by all members of the community. The *dance of the stick* illustrates the back-and-forth rhythm of shared leadership, where both children and educators are empowered through the act of mutual disempowerment. In this sense, the power of leading play experiences is shared and never fully possessed by one or the other. By surrendering control, educators rediscover the joy of learning alongside children whose diverse capabilities are honored and respected.

A negotiated curriculum replaced what Sampson and McLean (2021) describe as a “rule-based culture,” creating space for educators to center their attention on play. The adults' attunement and responsiveness to the children's interests were reflected in the materials offered in the outdoor environment, in how the natural setting (weather and season), influenced engagement, and in how educators both responded in the moment and planned future experiences.

The loose parts invited children to express their ideas and innovations freely. For example, in Figure 3, child M (4 years old) selected two narrow planks and, quite unexpectedly, demonstrated her knowledge of cross-country skiing. The educator responded by picking up a plank and joining her, snowboarding alongside. Through this shared moment, the educator honored the child's idea and demonstrated respect for her leadership in play.

Attunement is the educator's entry point into the child's world by engaging in an act of being truly present. As Foran et al. (2021) note, being attuned and reflecting pedagogically allows educators to recognize the child's unique sensibilities while also examining their own practice. In doing so, educators awaken to the ethical and relational responsibility of teaching, where learning becomes a shared and deeply human experience.



Fig. 4: Caped players

Awakening to children's theories and ideas requires educators to be thoughtful, courageous, and humble. Thoughtfulness is demonstrated when an educator honors a child's play and remains open to the possibilities it offers. For example, in Figure 4, a group of children explored notions of power and strength through super-hero and zombie dramatic play. The educators observed that the children's play centered on saving others, being fierce, strong, and courageous. To extend these ideas, the educators introduced capes and other fabrics to enrich the children's role playing. The caped players roared loudly, ran, and leapt across the play yard as rough-and-tumble play unfolded. If the educators had not attuned to the meaning behind these play ideas, the common reaction might have been to restrict such play due to safety concerns.

However, the courageous educator trusts in the value of children's play, even when it involves risk. Dietze and Kashin (2019) affirm that "risky play is now aligned with generating many positive outcomes for children. It is time for early learning students and teachers to reframe their perceptions that risk is something to be avoided" (p. 133). Through the characters they embody in caped play, children test their physical, social, and emotional limits. Pretend play allows them to explore empathy, courage, and care for others, while examining themes of power and strength within the safety of their imagination. As Rao and Gibson (2021) note, imaginative play provides an important avenue for young children to explore their emotions.

When children lead their playful learning with educators as collaborators and supporters, the power of structure is transformed: children gain freedom to make decisions within an environment of trust and support. As Jerome and Starkey (2022) point out:

Once children have the right to express themselves and influence decisions that concern them, they may be said to have agency, that is, a sense that they may be able to engage with the structures around them and have some control over their own lives. (p. 440)

Within this study, children's agency was visible through their confident decisions, collaborative play, and ability to influence the direction of learning outdoors.

Within this early learning and childcare setting, the relationships between children and educators were grounded in love, care, and mutual respect. Cultivating such a climate requires dedication and passion, qualities that go beyond theory and which must be lived and visibly enacted. Siraj et al. (2019) emphasize that for professional development to be effective, both the evidence base and the method of delivery are critical. When educators work in isolation and are only exposed to practices within their own settings, opportunities for professional growth are limited. While workshops and conferences often provide inspiration, their impact tends to be short-lived. Sustainable change, by contrast, occurs when educators engage in ongoing reflection, coaching, and collaborative support that nurture both their practice and professional identity.

To design and implement professional development that leads to transformational change, it is essential to recognize that meaningful shifts in practice require ongoing support, multidimensional approaches to training, and dedicated time for reflection. Educators also need opportunities to apply, evaluate, and refine new skills within a conceptually aligned community of practice. As Siraj et al. (2019) emphasize, educators must be given space to engage in and assess their interactions within, between, and beyond the training context.



Fig. 5: Collaboration

In this study, the researcher collaborated with children and educators over a four-month period. While such intensive engagement is uncommon in professional development, this study demonstrates the value of this type of immersive learning. Modeling how educators surrender control and share power while building relationships requires time and cannot be achieved through a single workshop or conference

(see Figure 5: Collaboration). Although the exact pathway followed in this study cannot be replicated, fostering long-term relationships requires time between children and educators and is achievable. Allowing children to share leadership within a non-hierarchical structure is essential for high-quality early learning and childcare practice (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011). A child's right to make choices should not be exceptional; rather, it must be the normative.

Educators entering the profession must be aware of their own power over children and be willing to act as co-learners and co-facilitators of play and learning (Makovichuk et al., 2014). In Canada, the field of early learning and childcare requires a new model of professional development that prioritizes long-term coaching and mentorship, similar to the approach highlighted in this study. Extended engagement allows educators to embrace the concept of "being with" (Clark, 2023). Clark (2023) explains that this concept is linked to finding the rhythm of the children but also attention to "the 'rhythm' of colleagues, materials, and ideas" (p. 39). Over the four-month period, relationships between educators and children developed a shared rhythm, grounded in trust and collaboration.

Recommendations

The researcher continued visiting the children until spring 2023, while the student moved to a different early childhood setting. The *dance of the stick* persisted, surfacing in outdoor adventures during each visit. The child who danced with the practicum student later shared the dance with others, the sticks moving in harmony, accompanied by trust, laughter, and joy.

Relationships within the community deepened as educators planned outdoor experiences guided by children's play and encounters with nature. Documentation of these experiences provide opportunities for reflection and ongoing inquiry. The power over play is held by the children, while the educators marvel at their creativity. Wonderings continue as educators collaborate on play proposals, learning from children as their theories unfold. The Reggio Emilia term *mettersi in gioco* or "putting oneself into play" (Giamminuti et al., 2024), captures this ethos of educators engaging in playful inquiry, questioning themselves and their practice, while co-learning alongside children.

The natural world offers endless possibilities for both children and educators, with the season and weather acting as informants. Educators remain ready to respond meaningfully in the moment and through subsequent proposals. Such responsiveness encourages "attentive waiting" (Clark, 2023), a form of listening that allows slow knowledge to develop. "Working in a playful, unscripted way with materials may enable listening to happen 'differently' and for slow knowledge to develop" (Clark, 2023, p. 71). This approach encourages educators to remain present, attentive, and responsive, encouraging children's ideas and play to guide meaningful learning experiences.

Play is valued for what it represents to the child. While adults may misinterpret aspects of play, children are forgiving. The journey of outdoor pedagogy is an "adventure of growing" (Giamminuti et al., 2024), in which educators actively engage with children, sharing experiences, celebrating their creativity, and honoring their agency.

Notes

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