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Marilyn Flear  
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# Theorising Play in the Early Years

*Theorising Play in the Early Years* is a theoretical and empirical exploration of the concept of pedagogy and play in early childhood education.

The book provides an in-depth examination of classical and contemporary theories of play, with a focus on post-developmental perspectives and Vygotskian theory. Marilyn Flear draws on a range of cross-cultural research in order to challenge Western perspectives and to move beyond a universal view of the construct of play. Culture and context are central to the understanding of how play is valued, expressed and used as a pedagogical approach in early childhood education across the international community.

Designed as a companion to the textbook *Play in the Early Years*, but also useful on its own, *Theorising Play in the Early Years* provides indispensable support to academics and TAFE lecturers in early childhood education in their course development and research.

**Marilyn Flear** is Professor and Foundation Chair of Early Childhood Education at Monash University, Australia, and the President of the International Society for Cultural Activity Research.

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## Foreword

FLEER'S BOOK IS as an integrative account of children's play that is squarely situated in cultural–historical approaches to human development. By building on Vygotsky's theory and bringing together previous psychological, anthropological and educational studies, *Theorising Play in the Early Years* offers a comprehensive and interdisciplinary theory of imaginative play development. It illustrates how children's communities and their development goals, children's relationships and the tools of their culture such as toys interact with one another and influence children's representations in imaginative play. Most importantly, the book offers a previously unexamined feature of contemporary childhood: the role of digital technology in children's imaginative play and its contributions to symbolic development and children's education.

The central point of this book is that play is a learnt behavior that simultaneously represents the transformations of children's cultures and children's development in relation to one another. The point that children's cultural contexts form children's play is made in two principled ways. First, a rich presentation about the theories of toys illustrates the inherent connection between cultural tools and children's representations in imaginative play, and as such, serves as a background for the examination of digital technology as toy and its role in children's imaginative play. Second, a description of two contemporary low income Australian families' engagement in play with their children illustrates how family and community contexts vary in their provision of opportunities for imaginative play. Noteworthy in these illustrations is the fact that one family supports engagement in imaginative play while the other does not. These descriptions are offered not to pass judgements about them but rather to reveal that families' priorities and preferences about their children's development and play vary and differentially influence children's play.

The discussion of how toys and family contexts simultaneously contribute to children's engagement in play offers important layers of analyses that need to be

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considered in cultural–historical approaches to the study of play. It is significant that the book encourages integration of the study of toys – which is often left for anthropology and sociology – with psychological approaches to children’s imaginative play. This integration stresses the use of historical analyses in understanding the intricate connection between cultural tools and representations in play. In addition, the study of two families in terms of naturalistic observations of them in their homes and for long hours yields a rich description of the families’ lives, helping us to situate play activities and their meanings in proper perspective. Basically, given the historical analyses of toys and the naturalistic observations of families, the message of the book is clear: a fair examination of children’s play and its potential contributions to children’s development and education require stepping out of psychological laboratories and looking at people’s activities from their own cultural and historical perspectives in a manner that is free from the researchers’ bias.

As Fleeer provides an indepth analysis of how children’s contexts contribute to the emergence of their play, she also tackles how children influence the transformation of their culture through play. In keeping with Vygotsky’s theory that play anticipates future, Fleeer devotes several chapters to the discussion of what guides children to the illusory world of play and the results of children’s engagement in play for their and their culture’s development.

A novel description of imaginative play as a cultural–historical activity is presented to develop these points. This significant contribution untangles dimensions of play that have been previously taken as enigmatic features of this activity. For example, the book addresses what motivates children to the world of play and keeps them there. Indeed, Fleeer acknowledges Vygotsky’s thesis that unrealised tendencies and wishes of ‘real life’ guide children to imaginative play, that is, in play, children satisfy a desire that they are not able to in real life. Fleeer builds on this by claiming that the tension and excitement experienced by the players between the real and the imagined situations is the affect that keeps children in the illusory world. This excitement is experienced in children’s adoption of roles represented in play and also in maintaining as porous the boundary between reality and imagination. In other words, just as the imagined story motivates children to engage in it, the blurred boundary between imagination and reality creates tensions for children, flexibly allowing space for the negotiation of play themes, plot and role transformations. In Fleeer’s words, a play world created as such lends itself to the recreation and representation of children’s understandings of events and roles. As children address and cope with these tensions, they construct knowledge and reach shared understandings.

Powerful theoretical statements about the affective and cognitive processes involved in the development of play narratives, combined with the empirical illustrations of this connection, makes this book an important contribution to those who are interested in psychological development during early childhood.

In a similar vein, descriptions of how children's resolutions of affective tensions yield construction of science concepts illustrate contributions of play to children's education, presenting this book as an important source for early childhood educators.

According to Fleer, once children are affectively charged and engaged in it, three features of their activity account for their transformations. Not examined in previous work in relation to one another, these are exercise of will and power, development of consciousness about social roles, and meaning making through representations. In this book, these features are considered simultaneously to illustrate that in play children improvise their experiences and understandings and in the process of doing so develop self-awareness about their capacity to manipulate their experiences. In addition, by appropriating social roles children develop the notion that imaginative play is guided by the rules that come with the roles and, in turn, this understanding gives rise to appreciation of games with rules. Finally, Fleer discusses play as a meaning making activity that involves three developmental steps. In the beginning, the object and the meaning are fused when objects are used in a manner that is consistent with their assumed function, then the idea of objects dominates play in imaginative play, and finally, playing with concepts without having to rely on objects takes place.

*Theorising Play in the Early Years* extends these points to bring to our attention an important feature of contemporary childhood, namely, children's use of digital technology as part of their imaginative play and the explanations of how it is integrated into children's imagination. Two parallel extensions of existing theory are offered to describe children's use of digital technology in imaginative play. These extensions are based on a study conducted with preschool children on their use of digital tablets in representing a fairytale, in this case, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. The first extension relates to a description of children's affective involvement in representation of the fairytale; the second extension relates to conceptualisation of symbolic representation in representation of the fairytale with digital technology. Elaborate presentations of both extensions converge on a previously unknown possibility, namely, imaginative play that involves digital tablets affords possibilities for the development of layers of consciousness that may not be possible in play that does not include this technology. Again, rich descriptions of how children develop affective and symbolic capacity for reflection on their activities and themselves will render this book directly relevant to those who are concerned about early childhood development and education.

The insightful theoretical and empirical work reported in this book ends with a discussion of policies and practices about play in early childhood education. By referring to many different national policies about play, Fleer turns again to her central thesis that play is a learnt behaviour, a human invention.

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A keen observer of play and witness to its contributions to advancements of children's learning, Flear is clear in recommending that, when appropriate play opportunities are afforded to them, children will engage in and benefit from imaginative play.

*Artin Göncü*  
*University of Illinois at Chicago 2013*



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## Preface

THIS BOOK PRESENTS a contemporary case for the psychological value of role-play and, through this, to give a different kind of reading of play than would normally be presented within the field of early childhood education. Play in early childhood education has generally been conceptualised in relation to its value as a pedagogical tool for supporting the development of children's learning. What has been missing from mainstream educational research has been a close study of how role-play develops as part of a child's psychological functioning and as a form of cultural expression in some societies. In this book cultural–historical concepts are drawn upon to discuss past and contemporary play practices, including a theoretical discussion of digital play, in which meta-imaginary situations, digital placeholders and virtual pivots are enacted in role-play. The content of this book directly links with the textbook *Play in the Early Years*, also published by Cambridge in 2013. It is the dialectical relations between the child's perspective and the cultural orientation framed through the prism of social relations that creates the dynamic movement for the cultural development of role-play. Concepts such as *perezhivanie* (a Russian term meaning 'unity of imagination and cognition'), tools and signs, imagination and creativity, and cultural expressions of play, leading activity, motives and demands are discussed to expand and further theorise play in relation to children growing up in a modern era.

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