

# INTELLECTUAL OUTPUT 1

## PLAYING PROJECT



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# MAPPING OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING AS A TEACHING METHOD

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## INTRODUCTION

The Playing Project, co-financed by the Erasmus + programme, (2020-2023) is aimed at increasing quality in early childhood education and care through the development of new knowledge on teaching approaches based on the role of play and more specifically on the symbolic play.

The specific objectives are:

- 1.To strengthen the skills of pre-school teachers through innovative play-based learning methodology;
- 2.To improve the quality of preschool services introducing transnational peer review-based processes in relation to learning methods.

The project involves eight partners from five European countries: Municipality of Linköping (SE), SERN - Sweden Emilia Romagna Network (IT), Municipality of Parma (IT), University of Linköping (SE), Escola Sant Josep (ES), UCL - University College Lillebaelt (DK), Elmer School (BE), Børneinstitutionen Holluf Pile-Tingkær - Odense (DK)

During the 3 years of the project, the partnership will develop three products, called Intellectual Outputs (IOs):

- 1.Intellectual Output 1 (IO1): a mapping analysis, offering an overview on the topic of the project, determining the existing needs and the gaps in methodologies and knowledge related to play-based learning.
- 2.Intellectual Output 2 (IO2): a training methodology, a teaching method comprises the principles and methods used by preschool teachers to enable children learning through symbolic play.
- 3.Intellectual Output 3 (IO3): a peer review toolkit, a tool to evaluate all preschool services in Europe on the correct implementation of play based learning methodologies in symbolic play activities.

More specifically:

The mapping analysis (IO1) offers an overview on the topic of the project, determining the existing needs and the gaps in methodologies and knowledge related to play-based learning. At the base of the mapping study there is the literacy review on pedagogical models involving play-based learning.

The training methodology (IO2) on play based learning is a teaching method comprises the principles and methods used by preschool teachers to enable children learning through play.



The methodology is based on guidelines, a set of principles that provide directions to teachers to enhance children's understanding and linguistic production through the use of the play in preschools. The main sections of the guidelines are:

- the concept of play-based methodologies and play;
- the role of teachers: direct and indirect teachers' intervention in play;
- essential aspects that make symbolic play a source of learning and developing linguistic skills in childhood
- correct adoptions of play in preschools:
- design the space
- materials
- time for playing

The peer review toolkit (IO3) is a tool to evaluate all preschool services in Europe on the correct implementation of play based learning methodologies in play activities. The aims of the IO3 are:

- Enhancing ongoing personal practice
- Engaging in reflective, constructive and analytical discussion with a peer on the use of play based learning activities
- Sharing good practice and allow for ongoing professional development

The IO3 develops explicit and defined criteria for peer reviewers to apply that will guide the reviewers through the whole peer review process, starting from how to get into peer reviewing, how to organize the peer visit, how to write the reports and provide constructive feedbacks, including review templates.

All the materials developed during the project by the partners are available on the project website <https://www.playing-project.eu/> even upon completion of the project itself.

The material of this publication is the result of a few months' research conducted by all the PLAYING partners, in the preschools of the partner countries. The Linköping University (the researchers Lina Lago and Helene Elvstrand) summarized the results of this research process.





In the Playing Project, focus is on play-based learning as a teaching method. By taking its starting point in children's symbolic play, the project wants to develop methods and approaches that contribute to the development of language.

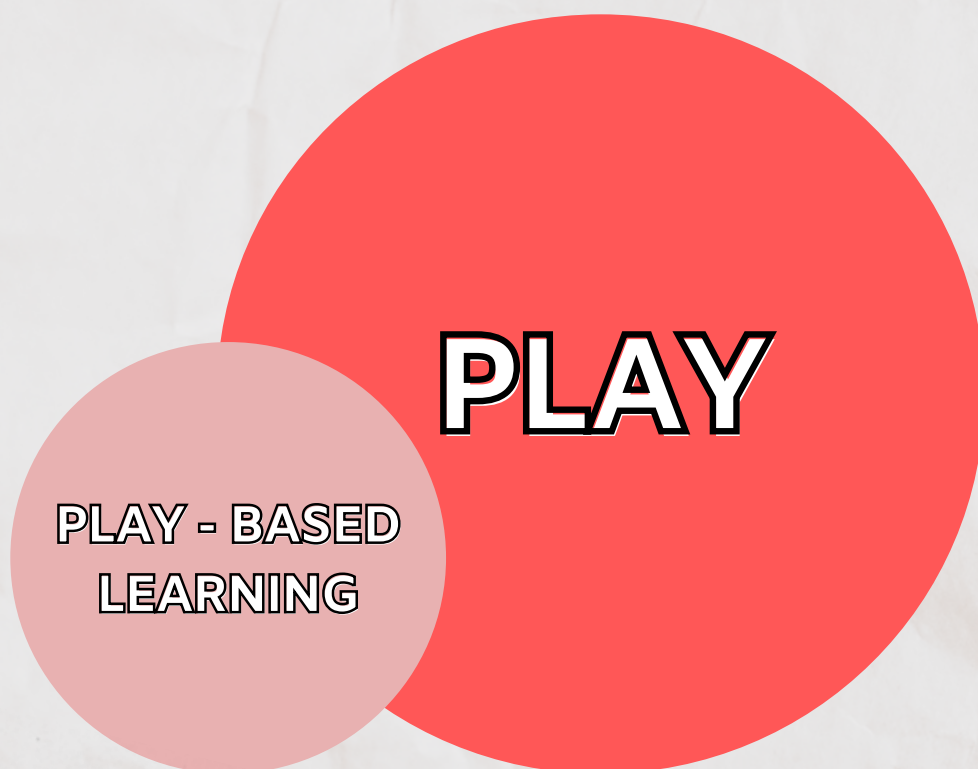
## THE FOCUS OF IO1

IO1 builds on a mapping aimed at giving an overview of the topic of the project, in order to determine the existing needs and the gaps in methodologies and knowledge related to play-based learning. The analysis is essential because it will ensure the originality and the relevance of the IO 2.

The mapping analysis has two aims. First, to conduct a literature review which compiles research about play in early childhood education in Europe, especially in the participating countries. The focus in the review is on how preschool teachers can support children's play. Second, to develop preschool practices in the different partner organizations.

## PLAY-BASED AND PLAY-RESPONSIVE LEARNING

Research on play as a phenomenon emphasizes the importance of teachers working with play in a systematic way to support children's development and learning in early childhood education. There is also a lack of research that focuses on the roles of preschool teachers in play, which highlights a need for more research and knowledge based in the practice, focussing on preschool teachers' actions. The importance of acting in an attentive and responsive way with regards to children's needs and interests when creating inspiring and inclusive play environments is emphasized (Skolforskningsinstitutet, 2019).



*The relationship between play and play-based learning*



In the Playing Project, the concept of play-based learning is an important starting point, specifically the concept of play-responsive teaching. In this section we will give a brief overview of what this concept entails and how it can be understood. A simple explanation of play-based learning is given by Danniels and Pyle (2018, p. 1), who states that it can be understood as “essentially, to learn while at play”. They go on to explain that play-based learning is usually used to illuminate and describe a part of the field of play where play is used in a conscious way to work with children’s learning. In a similar way, Pramling et al. (2019) discuss play-responsive teaching. They point to the directed or intentional action that learning entails. They connect play with didactic questions, and argue that in the work with play as a tool for learning, the didactic questions about what is to be learned, how and why become central. Thus, play-based learning is about something more than that in play there is always, or at least often, a potential for learning. Rather, the concept seeks to delineate and make visible teachers’ conscious attitudes and work with play as a means for children to learn about specific content.

The concept of play-based learning can thus be said to challenge some ideas of what play is. Pyle and Danniels (2017) show that preschool teachers who understand play and learning as different/separated concepts have difficulty grasping the idea of play-based learning. Play is often associated with children’s free play, and is described as child-directed, voluntary, internally motivated and pleasurable for the child.

Pyle and Danniels (2017) outline a scale of play activities ranging from child directed on the one hand to adult directed on the other. In play research and practice, adult-directed play is sometimes not understood as play. Pyle and Danniels (2017) argue that in the practice of education, play is often done in collaboration between children and adults. However, when thinking about play-based learning, it is not a question of the adult-directed play. It is often emphasized that collaborative elements are important when working with play-based learning. It is rather the conscious approach that is distinctive. Potential for learning and teaching can then be captured and based on both children’s free play and adult-led activities. The debate about play has free play on one side and teacher-led activities on the other. The idea of play-responsive learning challenges this in a way, as it stresses adult participation with children in play. Play-responsive teaching thus refers to a specific kind of play-based learning that emphasises the active role of adult in children’s play rather than adults organizing children’s play. Pramling et al. (2019, p. 51) highlight that play-responsive learning based on common and exploratory ways of working that points to the importance of children and adults directs their attention to something together. In this, adults need to relate to aspects such as:

- Exploring and turning to questions of “what something is and/or how it can be used”
- Using language and in other ways, using metaphorical terms
- Acknowledging and “showing each other what one sees, and receiving confirmation and perhaps a name for the object”



This is important in order to develop reflexive and prospective thinking in the interactions between children and adults, and to build shared and mutual play activities.



Map of child and adult participation in different play activities. The model places play activities according to child-adult direction on a scale from children's free play to play and games that is completely directed by adults. After Pyle & Danniels, 2017.

## SYMBOLIC PLAY

When talking about play, symbolic play is a key issue to address. Symbolic play can have many definitions, but within the *Playing Project*, the term refers to play in which children use different kinds of symbols. Important aspects of symbolic play are to make believe or pretend. The “as if” aspect is a very important part of children’s play. Symbolic play can incorporate aspects of fantasy as well as everyday life and can be viewed as a child’s way of dealing with – both understanding and exploring further – their experiences (Lillemyr, 2009). This makes children’s first-hand experience, but also borrowed, shared and added experience, important aspects of symbolic play. Expanding children’s symbolic play in the preschool setting can be seen as important, in order to give children more experiences to draw from in their symbolic (both everyday and fantasy) play. Schwartzman (1978, p. 326) argues that play can be understood as transformations, as “turning the novel into the familiar”, and that children use play to familiarise themselves with the world and the new. In a similar way, Broström (2020) refers to Fröbel and Vygotsky and the notion of play being a way for children to internalize the external and externalize the internal. In this way, play is important both in relation to children’s learning and development and in relation to children as social beings. Drawing from this and from the ideas put forward in the concept of play-based learning, togetherness is key to work with and within children’s play to facilitate learning. Doing this is a balance between children’s self-determination and ownership of play, and the directed gaze that teaching requires. This demands a sensitivity and knowledge of the specific child, group and context.



A researcher who has emphasized the social dimensions of play is Corsaro (2005). He argues that in addition to being important for building relationships with peers, this social dimension also entails that children use, refine and expand their communicative skills. As play is characterized by common agreements between participants, communication to decide, agree and change these agreements is needed throughout the play so that the participants agree on the frames for the play. This communicative nature of play is an important basis for language development.

Symbolic play is also shown to be important in language learning. Children's earliest discoveries about literacy are learned through active engagement with their social and cultural worlds.

Children learn about literacy through interactions with more experienced members of the culture (teachers, parents and more knowledgeable siblings or peers) in a process of guided participation (Rogoff, 1990; Jalil & Abu Bakar, 2006). In symbolic play, learning can take place in a way that facilitates children's competences and participation as literacy and symbols are closely connected and intertwined. Symbolic play can be a space to support different communication skills based on the frame of imagination that symbolic play entails. Research has shown several benefits of literacy training through symbolic play. The imaginative function of language and symbolic play facilitates the use of and developing of language skills such as the use of explicit languages, verbal expressions to negotiate in the play, and meaning-making (Pellegrini & Galda, 1990). Symbolic play can also help to improve children's comprehension of literate content (comprehension and recall of stories, play what they have read) and to develop the role as readers and writers that children take during symbolic play (pretend reading, writing the alphabet) (Jalil & Abu Bakar, 2006). Overall, symbolic play can be seen as a potential space for learning and development of language both by social practice of skills in a meaningful setting for the children, and by taking children's activities and experiences as a starting point and thus building on their participation.

### **TAKING A PLAY-RESPONSIVE POSITION WITHIN SYMBOLIC PLAY**

In the Playing Project, the objective is to work with children's learning within symbolic play. To do this, teachers must take part in play using tools from the responsive play framework. This means that teachers bring intentions into the play; with this in mind they can respond and act within play to facilitate learning. This is to be done with sensitivity or responsiveness to children and to the process within the play, and requires that teachers take part in the play, reflecting on their own roles, actions and interactions. Building sensitivity to children's perspectives in play also requires knowledge of the context around the children. Such knowledge can be acquired through listening to children's own voices, observing children's play or communicating with other educators or parents.



## RESEARCH ON CHILDREN'S PLAY IN DIFFERENT NATIONAL CONTEXTS

This section presents a short overview of how play and how preschool teachers can support children's play. The overview is based on some key references from each national context and should not be seen as exhaustive. Rather, it aims to explore and provide examples of how play and adults' participation in play are viewed in different national contexts.

In the Swedish context, we have chosen Skolforskningsinstitutet's (the Swedish Institute for Educational Research) (2019) systematic research overview of how preschool teachers support and stimulate children's social abilities through play. The overview shows that preschool teachers have several strategies for supporting children's play and development. In the report, these are divided into three different categories, to direct, to participate, and to observe and reflect. In these different types of actions, preschool teachers take on different types of roles. Directing actions is about preschool teachers creating conditions for play and development by, based on goals and knowledge of the context, for example arranging the environment, planning, or setting frameworks for play or developing play materials. In the participatory actions, the preschool teachers act in or during the play situation by participating in play with children and guiding and supporting the children. Observation and reflection are about adjusting, and changes based on observation of children's play to support play, learning and development. With the concept of play-responsive teaching, Pramling et al. (2019) want to challenge the division between play and teaching. They emphasize the importance of teaching preschool pedagogy with focus on the children through participation in the game and the teacher's responsive and sensitive approach.

In the Italian national context, Bondioli (2001) has studied symbolic play, emphasizing that from a Vygotskian perspective, where aspects such as proximal development are in focus, adult guiding is important for children to develop play competences. Bondioli argues that this is valid for all children, not only children who are struggling in play and that, if we are to take children's play in institutional contexts seriously, we must ask ourselves how and when adults should intervene in children's play. Even if symbolic play is an activity that in many ways belongs to the children, in the context of education, adults must have a role and work with their intentions with the play. Bondioli introduces a model she calls "a tutorial model", that draws on Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding. As symbolic play, according to Bondioli, is a spontaneous and self-motivating activity for children, it is important that adults can guide children's play gently. In a later text, Bondoli and Savio (2021) highlight formative assessment as a way to work with developing learning possibilities in children's symbolic play. Drawing on knowledge from this assessment, preschool teachers can steer or guide children to develop their play skills.



In Denmark, Broström (2020) argues that children's free play has been broadened within the preschool setting. Adult-led or adult-initiated play can have different motives. Such motives can be learning and teaching, to facilitate quality in play, issues of power relations between children, or to prevent social exclusion within the child group. The Danish researcher Skovbjerg (2017) highlights the importance of play's intrinsic value. Even if play carries great possibilities for learning, it cannot only be seen in an instrumental way. She argues that teachers at the same time must be able to orientate themselves towards the play's intrinsic value and function. By pointing to the mood of play (Danish "stemmninger"), the teacher can orient towards children's play in a sensitive and child-centred way. Skovbjerg emphasizes a student- or child-centred, and several studies focus on the framing of play rather than teacher participation in play. These studies highlight the importance of setting the scene for children's or students' play. To understand how play is understood, it is important to create the setting of the play to facilitate playfulness. Hovgaard Jørgensen et al. (2022) argue that materiality and how the frame for play is set are important issues to consider when working with playful learning. In a similar way, Hijkoop et al. (2020) explore the importance of open and permissive settings to facilitate children's participation in pedagogically framed play. In situations where teaching occurs, children can feel that they are supposed to give certain answers, which may hinder exploration. By exploring the question of "what if", the focus is less on answering correctly, which promotes children's exploration.

In the Spanish context, Miranda et al. (2017) have studied play in the outdoor environment and how play can promote social participation. They show that group play is the type of play that primarily promotes social participation, and that the outdoor environment should therefore be designed so that such play is facilitated. They also show that boys and girls participate to a small extent in the same games, even though play between children of different sexes promotes social participation. Miranda et al. therefore believe that gender aspects must also be considered when planning play environments. Another study that focusses on the physical environment for play is Çakırer and Guibourg (2010). They show that the organization of the physical environment is important for children's interactions, but that teachers' approaches also matter. In preschools where teachers took a more guiding role in play, the interaction between children were of higher quality than in preschools where teachers were less involved.

As the Playing Project focusses on the approaches of preschool teachers and staff, it is important to reflect on how the workforce in preschool settings is composed, and if different categories of staff relate differently to children in play. A Belgian study (Van Laere et al., 2012) explores these kinds of questions, comparing preschool staff's attitudes to their mission in fifteen European countries.



The study includes both formal “teaching” staff and other categories such as assistants, who in some countries can constitute half the workforce.

The results show that staff, regardless of degree of education, tend to divide care and learning even if policy in most countries highlights the opposite, i.e., that learning, care and play in preschool must be seen as integrated activities. Exploring early education in Flanders, Van Laere and Vandebroek (2018) argue that the system, which they describe as ‘split’, reinforces a divided view of care, play and learning.

Overall, the mapping of play research in the different national contexts shows many aspects of play of importance for the Playing Project. The overall research indicates that there are many aspects to consider when working to combine play and teaching. The teacher’s role is central, but one must also include aspects such as the environment and children’s participation. The research also indicates that there is a tendency to distinguish between play and learning/teaching. Therefore, working to bring these together includes both practical work and work with teachers’ understandings and attitudes to play and education.

## **MAPPING**

In this part of the report, we will show and analyse the results of the initial mapping activity done by the participating partners in the Playing Project. The mapping activity was set out to investigate the play in each country, focussing on both national and local policy of play, the views and experiences of preschool teachers, and the local practice of play carried out by the preschool teachers and children in the partner preschools. Each partner did a mapping of how play was described in the national and local curricula, a mapping of teacher’s views on play by interviews, and a mapping of play in practice by observations.

Below we present a short overview of play in policy, teachers’ views, and activities in each national context, together with a short reflective overall comment and then some general remarks and conclusions from the mapping, in order to identify both similarities and differences between countries.



## BELGIUM

POLICY	TEACHERS	ACTIVITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children's activities are "linked to different areas of experience"</li> <li>• Play is mentioned as one as the key features in children's activities</li> <li>• "Preschool teachers have an active and stimulating role"</li> <li>• Provide children with possibilities and opportunities to play and learn in playful ways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play is connected to experience and seen as an opportunity for the children to research, experiment, discover and try out.</li> <li>• To learn about themselves and of the world</li> <li>• Well-being (having fun)</li> <li>• Social play</li> <li>• Imagination</li> <li>• Teachers should observe, guide and encourage. Provide guidelines, frames and rules</li> <li>• Co-operation with families is stressed as a key factor for gaining knowledge about the child</li> <li>• Children should show independence/autonomy, play within the given frames</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce and plays with; withdraw and observe how the play is picked up by the children</li> <li>• Introduce, organize together with the children, participating and guide/challenge the children to challenge themselves</li> <li>• Children as play-owners, teacher available at children's initiative</li> </ul>

### OVERALL REFLECTIONS

In the Belgian data, play is described as the children's way to take on the world, which makes play an interwoven part of the practice, since one cannot work with children's development and learning without acknowledging play. Even if the curricula state an educational approach to play, in the teacher's descriptions, play is mainly seen as the children's own activity where an independent child is supported, stimulated and challenged by the preschool teachers. In relation to the development of a play-responsive approach, the idea that children should be independent in play and that adults should interfere as little as possible needs to be challenged. To shift to a more play-based teaching approach, the responsive but peripheral teacher role needs to change to a more active role during the entire play time. There is a basis for such a change of approach in the child-centred and guiding approach that is described in the Belgian data. Another view that is described, and that matches well with the play-responsive approach, is the holistic view where play is connected to learning as well as social interaction and well-being. There is also a strong emphasis on experience in relation to development and learning.



## DENMARK

POLICY	TEACHERS	ACTIVITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play as a right of the child</li> <li>• A broad or holistic understanding of learning where play is central</li> <li>• Play is linked to learning being exploratory, experience based and bodily</li> <li>• Play is seen as something in its own right</li> <li>• Play is a key feature in children's development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play as something that belongs to the child</li> <li>• Play as a way for children to own their experiences</li> <li>• Teachers' role is to support by observing and entering play – the importance of being responsive to the children. Play is on their terms</li> <li>• A dichotomy between play and structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experimenting, “playful exploration”, introducing/withdrawn teacher position, collaborative child interaction (independent together)</li> <li>• Child-initiated play, playing with/along and following the children, filling an unwanted position and facilitating the ongoing of the children</li> <li>• Children's own play, risk-taking, the teacher “guards” the boundaries</li> </ul>

## OVERALL REFLECTIONS

In the Danish data, play is seen as an important space for children's learning. Even if play is part of learning and learning activities, it is first and foremost something that belongs to the children. Play is emphasized as a right, something that should be part of every child's life. So there are two lines of play views, children's own play and play as part of early education teaching. These two kinds of play run through preschool education, making play present in all parts of preschool practice. At the same time, it is important to be aware that play can mean different things in different preschool activities. That play is integrated throughout policy and practice is a strength in the project. As is the child-centred approach that are described in the Danish data. Both the holistic view and the child-centred approach is well aligned with the play-responsive approach which builds on the idea of taking part in the ongoing play of children and educates from within play. The approach highlights the importance of being sensitive to children's actions and responses in play. The main challenge in the Danish data regarding a play-responsive approach is to challenge the view that symbolic play belongs to the child and the separation of children's own play and play-based teaching.



## ITALY

POLICY	TEACHERS	ACTIVITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play, seen from multiple theoretical perspectives</li> <li>• A main way for children to know and interact with the world</li> <li>• Experience and play are key concepts</li> <li>• Play is a language that children use to express themselves</li> <li>• “The child does not need someone to interpret his play or to push him to play, but rather an adult who knows how to be ‘in the situation’”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play is learning</li> <li>• Play is the child’s primary activity</li> <li>• Diversity is emphasized</li> <li>• The teacher’s role in child’s play is mainly that of observe and setting playing opportunities</li> <li>• The teacher sets up the space and to listen the children’s needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accompanies, sits next to them, collaborates, mediates the rules in the play, protects play, follows the rules</li> <li>• Initiated structured play, shows interest, prepares the play, follows the rules.</li> </ul>

### OVERALL REFLECTIONS

The Italian data expresses a strong sense of children’s ownership of play. Play is described as an essential part of children’s lives and is viewed as very important. Play is described as diverse, meaning that it needs to be understood in a variety of ways. In relation to the starting points of the Playing Project, the teacher is rather described as a “listener” and an organizer – “the director” – of play than someone who takes part in children’s play. A challenge thus lies in moving from a leading position towards the children to following the children in play. Symbolic play is viewed as a space where the teacher should not interfere. To move towards a play-responsive teaching approach, the teacher’s active role in symbolic play needs to be developed. There are also aspects to build on in relation to play-responsive teaching. One of the most prominent aspects described in the Italian data is the centred position of play in the early education setting. The diversity of play is emphasized, and different approaches of play is described as integrated in the practice.



## SPAIN

POLICY	TEACHERS	ACTIVITIES
<p>Children's autonomous exploration Play is what children do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affects their cognitive, psychomotor, affective, and social development</li> <li>• Knowledge of the environment that surrounds them</li> <li>• Their own thoughts and emotions</li> </ul> <p>Teachers should stimulate play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Children's experience</li> <li>• Play/learning or playful learning</li> <li>• A key to communication, abstract thinking, creativity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An important element of our lives</li> <li>• Engaging in play with children, joint experiences</li> <li>• A tool for teaching in an enjoyable way, engaging the children through play</li> <li>• Experimenting, experience</li> <li>• Both children's play and teacher-led play</li> <li>• Teachers should: teach play skills, prepare, and provide, introduce, adapt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children's free play, the teacher is at hand, autonomy is emphasized, gaining knowledge about the children</li> <li>• Introduce/set the scene, observe, support, attention and cooperation are emphasized</li> <li>• Introduce/explain, helping, supporting, following the rules and focusing on the task are emphasized</li> </ul>

## OVERALL REFLECTIONS

Play is viewed as a foundation in children's life and learning. In education it is given a central position according to policy as well as teachers. At the same time it is viewed as something other than teaching or other adult-led activities. Even if teaching can be playful, it is still separate from children's own play. In children's own play the teacher is described as an introducer, a helper or an observer, that is, when play is ongoing children are expected to be independent, cooperative, and to follow the rules. In relation to play and play-responsive teaching in symbolic play, there are both possibilities and challenges in the Spanish approach to play. The strong emphasis on sensitivity in the Spanish data is in line with the idea of responsiveness, since the teaching from within play should always be sensitive to children's actions and perspectives. The notion of (joint) experience and its importance is also highlighted in the Spanish data. To build on and expanding children's experience to enrich symbolic play is an aspect that can be used to develop learning within play. The identified challenges relate to the division of play and learning and to the teacher's role. Free play and teacher-led play are both described as a part of everyday activities but often seen as different things. In play-responsive teaching, the teaching takes place within play; the two are not different activities. To move towards responsive play and teaching needs to be merged. This also connects to the role of the teacher, where the teacher needs to move from a leading to a more involved role, from leading to being led, and from being outside the play to being within the play.



## SWEDEN

POLICY	TEACHERS	ACTIVITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Play is the foundation of development, learning and well-being”</li> <li>• Mix play and learning together</li> <li>• Play as a tool for learning – children should both learn how to play and learn through play</li> <li>• Play in its own right (fantasy and process impressions)</li> <li>• Children should be encouraged to play together, to explore and experience</li> <li>• Teachers should: encourage, provide conditions, follow, or lead play, participate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play is fundamental in children’s daily life</li> <li>• Play is children’s own arena</li> <li>• The teacher should be active in play</li> <li>• To understand the world through play</li> <li>• The teacher as a collaborator</li> <li>• Play as a value of its own</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children’s free and symbolic play, the teacher watches and asks “curiosity questions”, in some cases the teacher also takes part in the play. Social learning and play skills are emphasized.</li> </ul>

## OVERALL REFLECTIONS

In the Swedish data, play is identified as a foundation in children’s lives. Thus in the preschool setting, play is viewed as double, both as belonging to the child and as a didactic tool. In this way, how play is described is ambivalent both in policy and practice. In relation to play-responsive learning, this tension between teaching and play needs to be challenged further. Aspects of teaching and intentional guiding from within is adopted to different kinds of play and the analysis show that the teachers, depending on what kind of play, takes on different roles, i.e., an active or observing role. There is a difference between how teachers act in indoor play and outdoor play. The strong emphasis on responsiveness to children’s actions and perspectives is identified as an aspect that is central in relation to the frames of the Playing Project, and can be used and developed further to facilitate a play-responsive approach.



## OVERALL CONCLUSION OF MAPPING

The mapping analysis shows both similarities and differences between the different national contexts that need to be addressed in the Playing Project.

In all national contexts, play is, to some extent, viewed as "belonging" to the children. As described earlier, there is a debate where free play on the one hand and teacher-led activities on the other are seen as opposites. The idea of play-responsive learning challenges this, as it stresses adult participation with children in play. The results from the mapping show that there is a need to discuss and challenge the idea of play as something that children should be left alone in, if a more play-responsive approach is to be developed. As play-responsive teaching rather emphasizes that children and preschool teachers should take part in play together, making common experiences, preschool teachers need to challenge their roles in play. In the data, the preschool teachers are described as taking several positions in play, but, as shown in the figure below, many of these positions are outside or overlooking play; they are not acting from within play. They focus on instruction, observation or acting only at critical moments in the play such as starting up play or solving conflicts.

## ROLES



*Identified roles of preschool teachers in play*

To some extent, roles that can be used or integrated in a play-based and play-responsive approach is described in the different national contexts. To further develop an active adult role, a key aspect is to develop the work with teaching in symbolic play using with/within roles where teachers take active part in children's play. In this way activities can be developed where play is not described in tension with teaching, but rather where teaching is done in children's play together with sensitive and acting preschool teachers. Thus the tension between child-directed and adult-directed play that is described in many national contexts needs to be challenged and reflected on.

Another common theme is that the teachers mainly report that their task is to support play that fails or children who struggle with play. The play-responsive approach, on the other hand, starts out from well-functioning play and competent players. This means that preschool teachers need to develop methods, roles and approaches that relate to all play – well functioning or not. The social view of children's play that is described in the outskirts of the project expresses a need for a "together with" perspective in play. Drawing from the analysis of the national mapping, this is an important part in reaching the goals of the Playing Project.

An identified common idea that is an important basis to develop, challenge, and change ideas of play and the preschool teachers' role in play is the described link between symbolic play and experience; in all national contexts, children's own experiences are in some way emphasized as important in facilitating symbolic play. Experience is repeatedly described as a central way for children to get knowledge of the world. To develop symbolic play and to widen the possibilities for learning in play, both the experiences that children bring to preschool and the experiences that are made in preschool are described as important. In the national data, it is highlighted that preschool teachers need to be sensitive to children's views and experiences, if they are to be able to build on these in developing abilities and facilitating learning. At the same time, it is emphasized that preschool is a place where children can get new experiences. Working with and implementing methods that build common experiences in the preschool is an important aspect in widening symbolic play. As the idea of experience is also highlighted in the play-responsive approach, this is identified as a strong ground for building new methods and approaches to teaching in play.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PLAYING PROJECT

From the mapping there are some implications to be drawn, in order to develop play-responsive teaching in the Playing Project.

First, we identify the importance of working with the concept of symbolic play. If the symbolic play is to be the space where adults act together with children, ideas and conditions for symbolic play need to be processed. We can see that symbolic play is a kind of play that is often viewed as belonging to the children. If ideas of play-based and play-responsive learning are to be developed, preschool teachers must take a more active role in this kind of play. The “within-play-perspective” emphasized in the outset of the project requires a preschool teacher that takes part in play with intentions and sensitivity. In order to respond to children’s actions and perspectives, the teacher must work with ways to take part without taking over, to follow and make suggestions based on what is happening in the play, rather than instructing and intervening. Also, developing learning in symbolic play requires a broadened repertoire of play. It is essential to work with the following aspects:

- Designing space
- Materials
- Time for play
- Groups
- Role of the preschool teacher

The most central aspect to develop, based on the analysis, is the role of the preschool teachers. This means that preschool teachers might have to act in ways that may not be so common in existing practice in order to be able to teach based on participation rather than instruction.

Strategies to change/challenge adult positions to facilitate play-based and play-responsive approaches to learning are to:

- Follow the child within play
- Reflect on your own/with colleagues
- Reflect with the children
- Try and reflect on the play activity, try again
- Always be prepared to change your initial plans
- Do new things – take different positions

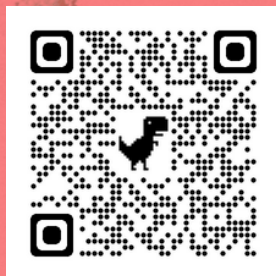
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