FORUM

# Play and Children's Museums: A Path Forward or a Point of Tension?

JESSICA J. LUKE, SUSAN M. LETOURNEAU, NICOLE R. RIVERA, LISA BRAHMS, AND SARAH MAY

**Abstract** Play is a central, defining concept for children's museums, yet it's become a hot button issue which is problematic if play is what makes children's museums uniquely valuable. In this article, members of the Children's Museum Research Network share findings from their first research study, focused on elucidating the problem of play in children's museums. Results suggest that children's museums may not have shared definitions and conceptualizations of play.

## THE PROBLEM OF PLAY

Play is a central, defining concept for many children's museums in this country. In fact, play is often highlighted as a distinct attribute that makes children's museums unique among other informal learning institutions. The Association of Children's Museums (ACM), a professional service organization for the children's museum field, describes children's museums as "places where all families are welcome and learn together through play and hands-on activity" (Association of Children's Museums 2015, 11). ACM's *Standards for Professional Practice* states, "Children's museums employ play as the accepted methodology for how a child learns" (Association of Children's Museums 2012, 3). Furthermore, many children's museums have play at the core of their mission, for example, Chicago Children's Museum—improve children's lives by creating a community where play and learning connect; KidsQuest Children's Museum, Bellevue, WA—create learning through the power of play and exploration that connects children to their communities and the world; and Miami Children's Museum—encourage visitors of all ages to play, learn, imagine, and create together.

While play may be central to children's museums, it is also problematic. Decades of research supports the educational value of play, with numerous studies showing how it benefits various aspects of children's development, from language acquisition to social skills to problem-solving (Ginsburg 2007; Lester and Russell 2010; Pellegrini and Smith 1998; Riley and Jones 2010). Yet, children's museums struggle to articulate how play contributes to children's learning. We hypothesize that part of the problem is that children's play is a notoriously difficult concept to define and operationalize. Freud, Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, and Bruner, for example, all highlighted the importance of play for children's development, though not

Jessica J. Luke, Ph.D. (jjluke@uw.edu) is the Director of the Museology Graduate Program at the University of Washington, Seattle, WA. Susan M. Letourneau, Ph.D., is the Research & Evaluation Specialist at Providence Children's Museum and a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Brown University in Providence, RI. Nicole R. Rivera, Ed.D. is the Academic Research and Evaluation Partner of the DuPage Children's Museum and an Assistant Professor of Psychology at North Central College of Naperville, IL. Lisa Brahms, Ph.D. is Director of Learning & Research at Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, as well as a visiting researcher with the University of Pittsburgh Center for Learning in Out of School Environments (UPCLOSE). Sarah May, Ed.M. is the Evaluation and Grants Associate at Boston Children's Museum, Boston, MA002E.

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necessarily in the same ways (Henricks 2016). Although children's play has been well-studied, researchers and scholars throughout history have approached it from a variety of theoretical perspectives, from constructivist (Piaget) to sociocultural (Vygotsky) to psychodynamic (Freud) points of view. As a result, there is no single agreed-upon definition of play—contemporary researchers have proposed various criteria, including categories of play types, qualities of activities, and dispositions with which an activity is approached (for reviews, see Brown 2009; Eberle 2014; Saracho and Spodek 1995; Sutton-Smith 1997)—making it challenging for museums to communicate clearly what is meant by "play." Even ACM does not offer a definition of play. Nevertheless, play has been a consistent part of early childhood education in the west since the work of Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey (Saracho and Spodek 1995). We wonder if children's museum professionals are talking about and using play without defining it, thus making it difficult for the field to come together around the concept and its benefits.

We suspect that another aspect of the problem is that the public does not fully appreciate the value of play. Parents may assign more learning value to structured versus unstructured activities, for example (Fisher et al. 2008). There is cultural variability in perceptions of play's importance (Gaskins 2008; Gaskins et al. 2007), and adults may not link play and learning during museum visits (Downey et al. 2010). At a policy level, children's play seems to be both ill-understood and under-valued. Despite the research described above, play is being removed from the school day, and early childhood education is shifting away from play-based practices to focus on academic achievement, due to policies like the No Child Left Behind Act (Miller and Almon 2009; Zigler and Bishop-Josef 2004). Outside of school, children's play is limited by concerns about children's safety, lack of neighborhood play spaces, over-scheduling of structured activities, and increased screen time (Hofferth and Sandberg 2001; Singer et al. 2009). These factors and others have resulted in a gradual decline in children's opportunities for free play, especially among children living in poverty (Milteer et al. 2007).

Together, these circumstances have caused play to become a hot-button issue. It is not well defined nor is it well understood, which is problematic if play is what makes children's museums uniquely valuable. Current research on play in children's museums tends to focus either on describing what children's play behaviors look like, parent–child interactions, or parents' perceptions of the importance of play. For example, Puchner et al. (2001) used naturalistic observations to document certain aspects of learning (e.g., causal, procedural, motor) in children's play at multiple museum exhibits, and examined the influence of adult involvement on children's behavior. Other studies have examined parents' roles in their children's play (Beaumont 2010; Gaskins 2008; Shine and Acosta 2000; Wood and Wolf 2010), or their beliefs about the learning value of children's play during their museum visits (Downey et al. 2010; Letourneau et al. in press; Swartz and Crowley 2004).

This current research does not address children's museums' beliefs about what play is and why it is critical for their missions. We believe that the children's museum field is strengthened through a more active discussion and debate of the role of play in children's learning in museum settings. In this article, we use data from a study conducted by the *Children's Museum Research Network (Network)* to examine how play is



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defined and positioned within institutional learning frameworks.

## CHILDREN'S MUSEUM RESEARCH NETWORK

With funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the ACM and the University of Washington's Museology Graduate Program (UW) created the *Children's Museum Research Network* in Spring 2015. The Network's goal: to generate actionable, cross-institutional research results to advance the field-wide priorities established in the Learning Value of Children's Museums Research Agenda (Luke & Garvin, 2014). The *Network* includes ten children's museums with ongoing research and evaluation efforts: Boston Children's Museum, Children's Museum of Houston, Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, Children's Museum of Tacoma, DuPage Children's Museum, Minnesota Children's Museum, Providence Children's Museum, Thanksgiving Point Institute, The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, and The Magic House—St. Louis Children's Museum. Over a 2 year period, the *Network* will conduct 3–5 research studies intended to enhance practice in children's museums and to help children's museums make a case for their learning value. The focus of these studies is determined by the collective *Network*, guided by the research priorities articulated in the Children's Museum Research Agenda as well as the capacity and assets of the *Network* in conducting these studies. In other words, the *Network* seeks not to enact its own research agenda, but rather to take on field-wide priorities that we believe will inform practice and policy broadly.

The first study undertaken by the *Network* focused on institutional learning frameworks, in order to explore the range of children's museums beliefs about learning. Learning frameworks "consolidate a museum's most important ideas about its learning interests and its potential to create value, in particular, learning value for its visitors and the community" (Vergeront 2011). As such, it is intended to guide institutional planning and assessment. By focusing on these frameworks, we sought to answer the following research questions: What major vocabularies do children's museums learning frameworks share? Where do they diverge? What constructs do children's museums use and prioritize in their learning frameworks? What learning theories do the frameworks implicitly and explicitly reflect or endorse?

We used a case study approach to investigate these questions, with a sample of 5 of our 10 *Network* museums that either had or were in the process of developing an institutional learning framework. Two complementary methods were used: document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Participating museums shared copies of their learning frameworks, which were analyzed using an emergent coding scheme to identify key vocabulary, constructs, and priorities across sites. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted via telephone with key staff at each of the 5 sites in order to clarify their definitions, assumptions, and learning theories. Interviews also permitted exploration of the context of each framework, including the impetus for development, goals for use, and implementation. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Table 1 describes the study sample.

For analysis, interview transcripts were divided into major topics by the UW Museology Graduate Program team, and then analyzed further by the *Children's Museum Research Network* members at an in-person meeting in Seattle. Small groups of *Network* members qualitatively analyzed data related to each of the research questions. Using an inductive approach, we identified emergent themes,

Table 1.
Participating institutions and their institutional learning frameworks

| Name | Annual visitors | Mission | Focus of learning framework |
|---|---|---|---|
| Children's Museum of Houston Founded 1980 | 800,000 | Transforming communities through innovative, child-centered learning | The museum articulates a focus on serving community needs such as the development of Houston's child population, supporting parental involvement, supporting formal learning, reducing the impact of poverty, supporting multicultural, multilingual programming, and supporting the development of 21st century skills. |
| The Children's Museum of Indianapolis Founded 1925 | 1.2 million | To create extraordinary learning experiences across the arts, sciences, and humanities that have the power to transform the lives of children and families | The museum stresses a socio-cultural view of learning with a specific focus on family learning which is defined as "cognitive (related to knowledge, application or content, etc.) or affective (related to relationships, emotion, attitudes, etc.) and occurs when family members interact with each other verbally and/ or physically." |
| Children's Museum Pittsburgh Founded 1983 | 300,000 | Provide innovative museum experiences that inspire joy, creativity, and curiosity | The framework articulates a description of learning practices that the museum has empirically identified to serve as design targets to support visitors' engagement in a maker-based exhibit. Play is explicitly identified in relation to tinkering which is described as "learners' purposeful play, risk taking, and evaluation of the properties of materials, tools, and processes." |
| Minnesota Children's Museum Founded 1981 | 430,000 | Sparking children's learning through play | The Museum provides immersive experiences and emphasizes play as a critical element for child development. The Museum advocates for "Powers of Play" which are a list of research-based 21st century skills. |
| Providence Children's Museum Founded 1975 | 161,000 | To inspire and celebrate learning through active play and exploration | The framework defines play and exploration as distinct processes that contribute to multiple aspects of learning and development, and lists a set of 'defining features' of museum experiences that support exploration, play, and learning. |

discussed and came to consensus on the abstracted nature of those themes, and then coded the transcripts to fully capture the manifestation of those themes within the data. One of the major topics identified by the UW team was the role of play within the learning frameworks. How is it defined? How is it related to learning? To what extent do these museums share common vocabulary and positionings relative to play? We hoped that the answers to these questions would provide a forum for the *Network* to openly problematize children's museums' relationship with play in the hopes of engaging the field in solution-focused dialogue. (Results related to our broader research questions are shared in the most recent edition of



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*Hand-to-Hand*.) We were intentionally emergent in our approach to defining play. Rather than starting with a definition of our own, we sought to understand the varying definitions as operationalized within these five children's museums.

## WHAT WE DISCOVERED ABOUT PLAY

The *Children's Museum Research Network* collaboratively reviewed and analyzed the interview data from the *Network*'s first research study, which focused on learning frameworks across five different children's museums. In reviewing the data, we noted many differences between the five museums' learning frameworks and how interviewees spoke about the content of these documents —including their discussions about play. The data revealed three key trends related to how each institution conceptualized play within their work.

### Participating Museums Emphasized Play to Varying Degrees

At the most basic level, each of the five children's museums studied here positioned play differently within their learning framework. Three children's museums mentioned play as a central aspect of their work. However, even within these three institutions, there was some variability in how much detail was provided about why play was important or what aspects of play were being supported, with one museum discussing specific aspects of play and others discussing the overall importance of play in broader terms. Participants from two other institutions explicitly *excluded* play from their learning frameworks, and focused their efforts on other outcomes and constructs instead. For example, the participant from Houston explained, "We tend to be very driven by this alignment with schools, and achievement in general, and I



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think that it's a little bit different of a voice and approach than lots of other children's museums take. You know, we just aren't willing to ground ourselves in the play theory." We wonder how closely these findings mirror trends in the larger children's museum field. While play is a central aspect of the work children's museums do, the inclusion or exclusion of play within institutional learning frameworks may reflect the challenges that museums face in discussing play internally, addressing public perceptions of the value of play, and balancing play with other institutional priorities and goals.

### Participating Museums Often Did Not Define Play in Their Institutional Learning Framework

Participants from only one children's museum provided a definition of play that they used throughout their framework. Providence Children's Museum defined play as "being free chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated, and involving active engagement." None of the other four learning frameworks defined play. Staff from two of these institutions spoke about play as being central to their work, but did not explain how play was defined within their institutions. Two other institutions did not explicitly include play in their frameworks, as described above. When asked about play in the interviews, staff at these four institutions spoke about various qualities of play (such as "being active," social interactions, "joy," "fun," etc.), but different museums emphasized different aspects of play as being most important or salient. In this way, play tended to be viewed as multifaceted, but the museums conceptualized play in different ways.



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### Participating Museums Held Different Beliefs About the Connections Between Play and Learning

All participants were asked how play related to learning in their learning framework. Participants generally felt that "play and learning aren't the same, but they share a lot of characteristics" (Providence). This idea was reflected in Pittsburgh's statement that "[joy is] totally inherent... So we want people to be playful ... with the way that they're engaged in making, but we don't feel like play is the end all and be all or the endpoint." Most interesting was that participants described various ways in which play and learning are related. Some said that play was a mechanism through which learning occurs. For example, "learning occurs during play" (Indianapolis), "children learn best through play" (Minnesota), and "learning takes play through active play and exploration" (Providence). Others said that play was the spark for learning, such as when Indianapolis described play as the "entry point" to learning.

Participants also described whether there could be play without learning, or one without the other. Generally, participants gave similar responses to this question: that learning can happen without play, but play could not happen without learning. For example, the participant from Houston, whose learning framework does not include specific references to play, responded, "I don't believe you can have play without learning. I think [we] are in agreement on that." Participants from Providence, whose learning framework was the only one to include an explicit definition of play, stated, "It can be exploring without necessarily having those qualities [of play]... We're defining learning as based on experience so I think we see play and exploration as both leading to learning." Other participants provided similar responses to this question, suggesting that—despite different descriptions of play within their learning frameworks—participants from each of these children's museums agreed on the fundamental assumption that learning happens during play, but that play may not be necessary for learning.

## A CALL TO ACTION

In our first *Network* study, we used a case study approach to analyze institutional learning frameworks from 5 children's museums to investigate children's museums' beliefs about learning, and specifically about play. In these interviews, we probed for institutions' thinking around the vocabularies, constructs, and theories related to learning and play. Granted, our study was small and further research is needed. But our findings suggest that even among museums that have formalized and documented their beliefs about learning, children's museums may not have shared definitions and conceptualizations of play. Play was not always included or defined in the institutional learning frameworks we reviewed, and the link between play and learning (or other benefits) was assumed, interpreted, and described in a variety of ways. For example, that "children learn best through play," that play and learning "share a lot of characteristics," or that play is the "entry point" to learning.

This study also revealed that museums may have strong beliefs about play that nevertheless remain unstated, and that different children's museums may be talking about different things when using the word "play." For example, sometimes "play" was defined as a set of characteristics (e.g., play as "freely chosen ... active engagement"), while other times play was associated with other types of behaviors (e.g., play

as a "euphemism for interaction"). As institutions who have traditionally focused on play as a means of supporting children's learning and development, how should the children's museum field interpret and make good use of these findings? One answer to that question may come from our interview data. For example, one of the children's museums in the sample shared their recent realization that their museum staff were using the word "play," but meaning different things, despite having committed to "an advocacy and play messaging role." Mobilized by an institutional need for a definition of play and a common understanding of its relationship to learning, this museum rebuilt their learning framework to include a "definition of play and how it connects to learning and also in more detailed descriptions later about how play leads to the kinds of learning experiences that we've defined." The description of this institutional conversation around play and learning seem to mirror the findings in the current study, and hints at one possible call to action—to work toward a common understanding of play and its relationship with learning. We suggest that children's museums might be stronger (both as individual institutions and as a wider field) if we were to fully wrestle with, identify, and articulate beliefs about play and its connection to learning. We argue that the field



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would benefit from grounding its discussions in existing research, which has identified many characteristics of play that could apply to museum environments, such as intrinsic motivation, active engagement, process orientation, and self-direction, among others.

We are not advocating for one single definition of play that all children's museums should adopt, nor are we suggesting that all children's museums should have play at their core. Rather, we believe that variance is important, and indeed, multiple definitions of play exist in the literature. But we wonder if the case for the learning value of children's museums would be enhanced if those who believe that play is at their core built on this existing work to establish a common language around play, perhaps even generating new theories about how play can occur in museum settings and what aspects of play museums can work to support.

As a first step in this endeavor, we argue that individual children's museums should discuss how they define play and its connection to learning, especially when creating institutional documents like learning frameworks or educational philosophies. By more clearly distinguishing and/or characterizing their definitions and stances on play, children's museums would be able to translate that meaning and value more effectively, both internally and to various stakeholders. Some of our interview data suggest this benefit. One of the children's museums in our sample talked about how they have used their learning framework to show funders the connection between play and benefits: "Connecting the story and telling the story of play and the benefits of it to children's future success… whether they're a healthcare company or a technology company and they want to hear about how kids are becoming more innovative or how kids are becoming healthier or happier… that story gets traction because it's relevant." Having a clearly defined internal understanding about play and its value for learning would benefit program planning, exhibit design, facilitation, communication, fund-raising, and many other aspects of a museum's practices, allowing museums to convey a more cohesive and persuasive message to their audiences. And by using similar vocabulary around play when articulating these beliefs, multiple institutions across the wider field would be able to engage in deeper discussions and collaborations that help to make the case for the learning value of children's museums in general.

Our intent is not to suggest that these findings can be generalized to all children's museums; rather it is to begin to build theory that we hope will be further discussed, analyzed, and studied. In fact, the *Network* is in the process of conducting a larger and more robust study, interviewing professionals from up to 50 children's museums across the country to more fully understand how their institution talks about and operationalizes play. We look forward to sharing these results in the coming months, and encourage others to contribute to the conversation as well. **END**

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