

# The Integral Role of Play in Early Childhood Education of Pakistan: A Fresh Perspective

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## Abstract

The distinction between play and formal learning in early childhood education has prompted significant concerns over its influence on holistic development. This study examines the importance of this discussion, with the aim of connecting the domains of play and learning by investigating the way they are interconnected. This study utilizes Vygotsky's theoretical framework to emphasize the interconnectedness of play, imagination, exploration, and learning. By utilizing descriptive information gathered from preschools in Pakistan, the research emphasizes the crucial significance of play and exploration in early childhood education, challenging traditional beliefs. The study's findings provide intriguing insights, demonstrating that play and exploration have a significant impact on learning and development. This research challenges the common belief that learning should be limited to formal instruction and argues that both play and exploration play a crucial role in human development. This study sheds light on the interplay between imagination and various activities, blurring the boundary between reality and the imaginary from the perspective of Vygotsky's views. Moreover, this study emphasizes the significance of re-evaluating preschool science introduction methods and timing because it impacts all preschoolers. We examine how spontaneous processes in exploratory play develop social, cognitive, and scientific literacy. This raises fundamental questions about Pakistan's educational systems and calls for more significant research on the balance between structured teaching and exploratory play in early childhood education to promote holistic development.

This revised vision of early childhood education promotes a play-based pedagogical approach, advocating for the inclusion of exploration as a critical component in education. As a result, this study calls for a reassessment of educational models and approaches in research and practice related to early childhood education (ECE). Additional research efforts are needed to investigate the complex interplay among play, exploration, and learning. This will help create comprehensive educational frameworks that address the holistic development of young learners.

**Keywords:** Exploration, Imagination, Play, ECE, Holistic Development

**Introduction**

The integration of play and learning is a common practice and subject of study within the field of early childhood education (ECE). Occasionally, presenters portray the association between learning and play in a manner that implies a division; Many people believe that learning can only occur through the instruction given by a teacher. On the other hand, often recess and other times when children are free from teacher monitoring are examples of play (Johansson & Samuelsson, 2006). This correlation suggests the subordination of the concept of play to formal learning. Children naturally want to participate in play as an enjoyable activity. Many people believe it is a helpful tool for children to gain skills and information judged worthwhile by someone other than the kid, usually an educator. This approach is often called "teaching through play" (Bennett et al.). This approach will be referred to as "play-for-learning," which encompasses formal learning that is teacher-led and goal-directed, focusing on cognitive development within a school-based context. This approach emphasizes a concentrated dedication to learning as the outcome of teaching, specifically through directed instruction, while not considering the types of learning that occur through self-initiated activities in which children engage spontaneously.

This paper argues for a return to the idea that play is a kind of learning. The concept of learning encompasses a broader scope, encompassing transformations facilitated by diverse experiences that lead to fundamental changes in an individual's knowledge, skills, and attitudes, in contrast to the limited cognitive understanding mentioned earlier. The change is because preschoolers tend to interact with the world through play and exploration instead of adult-led instruction. Therefore, play and exploration should be given priority as subjects of study and teaching if the discipline is to enhance further its knowledge of how learning occurs in early infancy. The primary emphasis of research and practical application should revolve around structuring early childhood activities that facilitate play and exploration to foster collaborative engagement between adults and children toward mutually agreed-upon objectives. This article presents evidence to support the notion that engagement can facilitate cognitive advancement and comprehensive development.

This paper's first section discusses play-for-learning in ECE research. In this analysis, we shall evaluate the underlying assumptions that form the basis of the play for learning plan. However, these assumptions must align with Vygotsky's ideas about play, fantasy, creativity, and practical thought. In 1978, Vygotsky formulated a theoretical framework that challenged prevailing notions regarding the relationship between fantasy and realistic thought. Elkonin (2005) asserted that Vygotsky's theory beat naturalism and psychoanalytic theories in understanding children's play. Many educators still rely on Vygotsky's theories regarding children's play to support the idea that play and learning are the most crucial elements in early childhood classrooms. According to this theory, play, and learning are closely intertwined and often occur sequentially. In this context, learning refers to acquiring academic knowledge in a classroom setting.

In the next part, we will discuss multiple instances of the play-based learning method. These examples demonstrate that the distinction between play and learning, as viewed through the lens of play-as-learning, arises from insufficient evaluations of Vygotsky's theories on play and creativity. These theories connect play and imagination, while structured learning is associated with practical applications. We provide a strategy that does not divide play/imagination and learning/reality in opposition into two different categories. Instead, we contend that play promotes learning, as we have characterized above.

Furthermore, we present a rationale for a paradigm shift in research and pedagogical approaches that acknowledges the significance of kids' exploration in preschool education. We criticize the focus placed on the value of play-based learning during this developmental stage. We depend on the expanding research document on early childhood learning and exploration to support this viewpoint.

We have a strong case supported by a study of Vygotsky's writings which demonstrates the interconnectedness of imagination and reality as two aspects of the same process. This connection is evident in play, exploration, and Learning. We demonstrate our point by demonstrating a preschool activity that combined two early childhood pedagogies: the pedagogy of listening Rinaldi (2006) and play worlds Lindqvist (1995), which both focused on planning preschool activities that allow for exploring natural phenomena. Preschools should prioritize play and discovery as a technique for learning. Children naturally learn and develop by creating an environment that fosters these activities. We claim that the play-based learning pair, built on exploratory play, must be rethought.

### **Current ECE Research, Policy, and Practice on Play and Learning**

Contemporary research paints a different picture, suggesting that play and learning are not binary but deeply interconnected, making them integral to a child's development; this marks a deviation from Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson

A comparison in 2006. Zosh et al (2018) describe how free and guided play promotes self-regulated learning. This form of learning engages children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and motor skills, which is critical to their overall development. In this perspective, play is considered both leisure and active learning.

Further, Weisberg et al (2013) argue that guided play, which lies between free play and direct instruction, has the potential to facilitate optimal learning. Here, adults support play by setting up environments and providing materials that promote learning, but they do not control the play, respecting the child's autonomy.

The concept of "playful learning landscapes" has been explored by researchers like (Grob et al., 2020). They propose that play and learning can occur concurrently in environments that promote educational interactions. Playful learning landscapes highlight that learning is not confined to structured, teacher-led activities, echoing Johansson and Samuelsson's (2006) view to "support but not disturb" children at play. Reconceptualizing learning as a goal-directed process, Li et al (2017) suggest that children can set and achieve their goals even within the play framework.

"The common perception of play and learning as contradictory elements, often present in educational research and practice, is something we want to investigate and challenge with our project. Playing and learning go hand in hand for little ones, though it can be challenging for teachers and researchers. Let us work together to make it happen! Our work aims to expand research and contribute to discussions about the relationship between play and learning. We also want to highlight how crucial understanding this relationship is for children and educators in preschools and schools (own translation)."

Recent research echoes Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson's assertion that play and learning are intertwined, emphasizing that fantasy, creativity, children's meaning-making, and autonomy are central to both. Researchers suggest these elements should be woven throughout pedagogical practices to optimize educational activities (Pyle et al., 2020).

When discussing how play and learning can be combined, Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson use an example of a 'narrative interplay' between a teacher and child in a preschool setting. In this context, the line between pretend and reality is blurred, and the children are the primary drivers of the narrative.

This concept resonates with Pyle and Danniels (2018), who propose the notion of a 'playful pedagogy.' They argue that this approach allows children to take an active role in their learning journey by encouraging them to create, negotiate, and communicate their understanding within a playful context. Thibodeau et al (2020) support bringing the 'real world' into play. They found that when teachers incorporated elements of the natural world into children's play, it enhanced their understanding and learning outcomes.

In the following example, we will explore how this updated research might impact the classroom:

Zainab, the educator, welcomes the children into a theme about zoo animals – present animals identified, described, and connected to 'reality' by both her and the children. Gradually, she broadens the context of their discussion and constructs an enclosure so that the zoo animals do not stray. The children are excited about doing part, "Should we create a small enclosure so that they cannot run away?" asks Zainab. The kids get down to creating a habitat for the zoo animals. Zainab picks up a lion and shares that she has two lions, and they are named Roary and King. The children respond with laughter. Zainab then picks up a monkey and inquires what it is. Upon receiving an answer, she adds: "But I do not have one like this!" The children respond: "Nooo!"

"He loves bananas, but he can stay here!" Zainab suggests. "And you have this one," She lifts a zoo animal.

"What is it?" asks Zainab. "A rabbit," someone answers, but Zainab asks repeatedly to confirm.

"A rooster," Ahmad calls out.

"A hen, I believe it is," Zainab corrects.

Zainab incorporates humor and imagination into her approach by using contrasts and playful absurdities, such as a banana-eating monkey and a goat that thinks it is a horse; this aligns with the educational approach of blending learning with play (Pyle et al., 2020).

This interactive session exemplifies the integration of play and learning, supporting recent research that encourages real-world elements in play to enhance children's understanding (Thibodeau et al., 2020). From our perspective, Zainab distinguishes between fantasy and reality and between play and learning, utilizing children's play to further educational objectives. For instance, she is determined to make clear that the 'hen' is neither a rabbit nor a rooster. This differentiation may not have relevance in play but is essential for the knowledge Zainab is imparting. Despite any contrary intentions, attempts to promote "playful learning" and incorporate education inside plays maintain the ideas that play and learning is distinct from one another. Consequently, despite their best intentions, Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson's strategy of using play as a means of education only further highlights the gap between the two.

The ambition to incorporate play and learning (i.e., play-based learning) emerges in an era with significant demand for preschool teachers to concentrate on quantifiable learning outcomes (Cunha et al., 2006)—the idea of using play as a means of learning advocates in preschool curricula across the globe. The American preschool curriculum program is widely

recognized for its excellence in preschool education: "Play is crucial for a child's development and learning. Deliberate use of play to encourage each child's growth and learning should be a characteristic feature of preschool activities" (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020). The learning approach advocated in this setting is characterized by its disciplinary nature and focus on school-related activities (Bassok et al., 2016). As preschool teachers, we can guide and inspire young minds by providing personalized instruction that promotes knowledge and values. Thanks to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, we have the tools to help every child succeed! Hence, with the growing international pressure on preschool educators to concentrate on learning outcomes - that is, to prepare children for school Bassok et al (2016); Duncan et al (2007); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018) -It is imperative to acknowledge that Playing is a precious technique for learning.

Pedagogy and policy have long believed that play and fantasy are separate from learning and reality. However, Vygotsky's theories propose that play and imagination aid in learning and developing realistic thinking. In the following sections, we revisit Vygotsky's theories to argue for an understanding that integrates play, learning, imagination, and creativity (Veiga et al., 2016).

### **Vygotsky's Theories on Play, Imagination, Creativity, and Realistic Thinking**

Vygotsky's theory of play emphasizes the need to comprehend imagination as part of creating and experiencing reality instead of considering it as something separate from reality. In accordance with Vygotsky, imagination and practical thought are not two distinct but complementary processes

"Imagination and creative thinking are closely entwined with lived experience, not separate from it. Observation of imaginative forms linked with creativity — those forms of imagination that reflect upon and interact with reality — reveals that the boundary between realistic thinking and imagination is not a clear divide. Imagination is an inherent component of realistic thinking" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 349; translation).

Realistic thinking is impossible without imagination, a necessary component of imagination. According to Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2020), human conscious experience is a process that requires not just our genetically given skills and our culturally organized experiences but also our active integration or 'filling-in,' our imagination as we work to understand our reality. Vygotsky asserts that creativity and imagination are closely related to reality:

*"No clear understanding of reality is possible without imagination. Concrete impressions presented in consciousness are rudimentary. The processes of invention or artistic creativity call for a substantial contribution by realistic thinking and imagination. They are a unity"* (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 349; translation).

Vygotsky outlines the developmental process of creativity by identifying four fundamental associations between fantasy and reality

1. All imaginative creations have elements of reality that stem from past experiences.
2. The experience is deeply rooted in imagination, as shown by imagining or recalling one's or others' experiences via narratives.

3. Reality-stimulated emotions drive imagination; imagination, in turn, influences emotions.
4. Imagination may become a reality when it emerges as crystallized imagination returning to reality, but as a fresh, active force capable of reshaping reality. Vygotsky (2004: 12) states that 'the ability to assemble elements into a structure, to innovate by combining the old in new ways, forms the cornerstone of creativity.'

Consequently, imagination and creativity are deemed indispensable for human thought and development. The interconnection between imagination and creativity is universal, evident in all individuals, including young children. Vygotsky posited that this interconnectedness is particularly prominent in children's play. He describes play as the physical manifestation of imagination.

A child's play is not a mere reenactment of her experiences but a creative reimagining of her impressions. Vygotsky (2004) contended that the child amalgamates impressions to fabricate a novel, imaginary reality tailored to her needs and desires. Before engaging in pretend play, children are limited by the objects around them as these objects dictate their meanings. Creating imaginary scenarios allows children to break free from these constraints and explore the world around them through play. However, when pretend play ensues, the relationship inverts: in play, meaning gains supremacy over the object, such that, for instance, a pretend play about animals can transform a wooden stick into a horse. This stick is a pivot or carrier, bridging the gap between the present reality and the realm of possibilities.

Abstract thinking is a crucial ingredient for play and a skill that blossoms through play. As children engage in play, they begin to assign new meanings to objects and actions, different from the meanings these items carry outside their imaginative play realm. A child's abstract thinking skill evolves and sharpens within this vibrant interplay of imagination and reality. Through play, children unlock the capacity to see beyond the immediate, literal interpretations, unfolding a world of abstract concepts and creative possibilities.

"Vygotsky (1978: 103) points out that creating an imaginary scenario can be viewed as a tool for fostering abstract thought. Moreover, he argues that actions within an imaginary context, voluntary intentions, real-life plan formulation, and the creation of volitional motives occur in the play. As such, play emerges as the zenith of preschool development. It is within the crucible of play that the child essentially progresses. Consequently, play is a leading activity that shapes the child's development (102-103)."

Emphasizing Vygotsky's conclusion, both imagination and realistic thinking are integral to play. The interaction with the 'real world' enables creativity and imagination, leading to the generation of possible or fantasy worlds. Have scholars heard about the exciting 'play-for-learning' approach in Johansson and Samuelsson's (2006) work? It is a modern alternative! This 'play-for-learning' approach tends to place learning, associated with 'the real,' on a pedestal, thus inadvertently creating a dichotomy with play. We contest this interpretation and propose a more integrated view of play and learning.

### **Exploring the Power of Play in Learning**

The pressure to harness play as an instrumental tool for enhancing learning outcomes and cognitive abilities in Early Childhood Education (ECE) has seen an international surge, especially within preschool settings (Jansen & Harvard, 2019; Pramling et al., 2019; Pramling

et al., 2020). In this context, Fler (2022) posits that imagination is a fulcrum between play and learning, a concept commonplace in preschool practices. She borrows from Vygotsky's observations on how children assign new meanings to objects to fortify her argument that imagination is vital in bridging preschool activities.

This perspective of imagination as a bridging mechanism, as illustrated in Figure 1, strengthens the perceived separation between play and learning. Fler (2022) refers to the "real" world, as represented in her work by the insects children discover while they play or encounter in fiction. Fler elaborates on how children oscillate between actively investigating these insects and fantasizing about them. She also details how the interaction of fantasy and reality becomes evident when children play with ideas - as manifested in imaginative statements such as insects' pincers being potent enough to decapitate one. According to her, this amalgamation of activities rooted in play and learning/reality equips children to leverage imagination in developing conceptual understandings of their world.

To substantiate her argument about how play nurtures imagination, Fler references Kratsov and Kratsova's work (2021). This work emphasizes the shift between reality and the imaginary:

"By consciously distinguishing between imagination and reality during play, children are conceptually primed to work with real objects and imagine (or abstract) ideas representing reality. Crucially, this contradiction between imagination and reality generates a dynamic force, facilitating young children's exploration of theoretical knowledge" (Fler, 2022, p. 254). Fler (2011) argues that there is a strong interdependence between imaginary situations and the development of concepts, particularly in preschool children. She suggests that imagination is central to how young children form and understand concepts. Fler supports her claim by presenting observations from her study, where she observed children using their imagination to make sense of the real world.

According to Fler, children can effortlessly transition between imaginary situations and real-world experiences. They can move back and forth between the two, utilizing their imagination to explore and comprehend various concepts. In other words, imagination acts as a bridge for children, allowing them to navigate between the abstract and concrete realms of understanding. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of this reasoning.

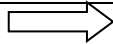

Activity for Play	imagination as a bridge between the two	learning
Fantasy as pretend 	Teacher's Specific learning outcomes (SLO) according to the curriculum.  A conceptual framework for this	Reality as a material world and engaging with abstract ideas and making generalizations

Figure 1: shows how play and learning are related. The right box depicts learning as gaining knowledge of facts and notions about reality, while the left box represents play as fantasies or pretends. The image makes a point about how dreams and reality are distinct. The center box shows what could be learned via play and education, with imagination as a link between the two.

Vygotsky's perspective suggests that imagination is a fundamental aspect of the creative process, encompassing both play and the investigative activities described by Fler.

Imagination is not merely a bridge between play and learning, nor should teachers artificially support it through didactic practices. Fleer's research is primarily concerned with the link between play and learning in preschool settings, consistent with Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson's (2006) ideas. This emphasis on play may respond to the increasing pressure on preschool teachers to enhance cognitive and academic outcomes. However, Fleer needs to effectively challenge these demands, even though she intends to restore play as a central component of preschool activities.

Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson (2006) further illustrate the differentiation between play and learning presented in Figure 1. Playing is often associated with fantasy or pretend, while reality is linked to learning to or authenticity, described as "for real." According to the authors, children can obtain information that informs their play and knowledge. They argue that facts and knowledge should coexist with fantasy and imagination.

This viewpoint emphasizes the distinction between imagination and reality, where reality represents the physical world, truth, and concepts, while fantasy is considered as unreal and not actual. For these scholars, children learn about reality through imagination and play.

To summarize, Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson emphasize the separation between play and learning, with play associated with fantasy and learning connected to reality. They claim that children should have access to factual information and imaginative play experiences since imagination and play are how children learn about the real world.

Our perspective differs from the previous one. Imagination is a vital and creative process that plays a crucial role in all types of learning, whether formal or informal. It is not limited to children but is also essential for adults in meaning-making activities, including art and science. Imagination is at the core of play and exploration, which are early forms of these activities. Imagery fills gaps and contributes to creating meaning in fantastical and real-world contexts.

### **The Role of Play and Exploration in Fostering Children's Learning**

According to our interpretation of Vygotsky's theories, Playing is a manifestation of creativity, where the focus is on the act of playing itself. This viewpoint aligns with the descriptions put forth by Steinsholt (2000); Rasmussen (2014), as they build upon Gadamer's (1975) ontological concepts of experiencing, understanding, and Bildung. Gadamer emphasizes the intrinsic value of playful exploration, where insight and understanding replace the traditional notion of learning. While we adopt a non-instrumental approach to play, we do not deny the premise that social, cognitive, and aesthetic learning happens during play. Furthermore, we contend that preschool environments should actively promote and enrich children's play by offering demanding and engaging activities, such as combined adult-child pretend play inside shared imagined worlds. The approach is Vygotsky-based and includes the play world's activity from Lindqvist (1995) and expanded upon by (Nilsson and Ferholt, 2015).

The significance of formal learning as the primary catalyst for developmental change in early childhood is evident in the crucial role of pretend play and the growing prominence of pedagogies of exploration in Pakistan. These pedagogies view children as creators of culture and knowledge, actively advancing theories and hypotheses (Dahlberg & Lenz Taguchi, 1994). Different expressive modes are used in exploratory projects to investigate ideas together (Alnervik et al., 2012; De Freitas & Palmer, 2016; Elfstrom, 2013; Olsson, 2009). In these types of projects, both students and teachers work together to construct meaning within open-ended learning contexts. De Freitas & Palmer (2016); Lenz and Taguchi (2009); Olsson (2009) all describe such processes as rhizomatic, meaning that they are indefinite.



Design pedagogies to incorporate play and exploration can create optimal learning environments for young children. In the following narrative description, we will present an account of events from a project that examined how teachers integrate play worlds and pedagogies emphasizing exploration. This description offers a valuable illustration of the potential pedagogical implications of combining play and exploration in early childhood education.

### **How Can a Play-Exploration Pedagogy be implemented?**

To demonstrate the intrinsic learning in exploring and playing, we cite a recent ethnographic formative-intervention research study grounded in cultural-historical activity theory (Engestrom, 2011). The research aimed to determine how instructors in a network of four preschools using a pedagogy of listening approach Rinaldi (2006) incorporated the play worlds play pedagogy, which was influenced by Vygotsky, into their practices (Lindqvist, 1995). Over a year, the researchers recorded the instructors' pedagogical practices through interviews, field observations, collecting and analyzing participant-generated media, and educational documentation.

To illustrate the possibility of a play and exploration pedagogy that respects children's self-initiated activities, we will rely on ethnographic data from a particular research (Feraholt et al., 2015a, 2015b). A team of four preschool teachers conducted interviews and analyzed digital documentation (text, pictures, and videos) of their work with 15 two to four-year-old children over several months. The study's objectives and specific results are beyond the scope of this conversation.

### **"Flying Objects"**

Objective: To explore the effects of air on different objects and understand the concept of flight (Activity Description)

#### **Introduction**

The teacher gathers the children in a circle, discusses their experiences with air and flying objects, and shows them pictures or videos of flying objects, such as kites, hot air balloons, airplanes, or birds. He asks questions to spark their curiosity, such as "What makes these objects fly?" or "Can everything fly?"

#### **The activity of Paper Airplanes**

He engages the children in making paper airplanes, demonstrates different folding techniques, and encourages them to experiment with designs. The children participate in the activity eagerly, then fly their paper airplanes in an open area, such as the schoolyard or playground. After this, they discuss their findings about how different designs and adjustments affect the flight of airplanes.

#### **Outdoor Observation**

Teachers leave the classroom and take the children outside to observe natural flying objects like birds or insects. He discusses and encourages them to notice how these objects stay in the air or maneuver through them. He facilitates discussions about the different adaptations or features that enable these objects to fly.

### Reflection and Discussion

After this, he gathers the children to reflect on their experiments and observations. He asks open-ended questions to stimulate critical thinking, such as "What did you learn about flying objects and air?" or "Why do you think some things can fly while others cannot?" Encourage the children to share their theories and ideas about flight based on their experiences. Contemplating the interplay between reality and imagination, the teacher grapples with a personal question: "Have I truly been flying?" To understand this intriguing fusion, the teacher asks the children: "What is the key to taking flight?" Intriguingly, the children respond with fascinating explanations: They need wings to fly.

The Single National Curriculum (SNC) for ECE in Pakistan focuses on holistic development, which includes cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and creative aspects. Could there be a connection between this theme and the SNC? Let us investigate.

### Cognitive Development

**Observing and Analyzing:** The children in the story observe pictures and videos, make comments, ask questions, and conduct experiments; this promotes their observational skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities.

**Scientific Inquiry:** The children's experiments and theories reflect scientific inquiry skills, such as formulating hypotheses, conducting experiments, making observations, and drawing conclusions.

### Physical Development

**Fine Motor Skills:** Filling balloons with air, sand, and water involves manipulating small objects, strengthening hand muscles, and refining fine motor skills.

**Sensory Exploration:** Blowing feathers with a hairdryer allows children to experience and explore different sensory stimuli, such as the air's feel and its movement's visual effects.

### Social and Emotional Development

**Collaboration:** The children work together, discuss ideas, conduct experiments, and propose theories, fostering collaboration, teamwork, and communication skills.

**Curiosity and Engagement:** The children show excitement, curiosity, and interest in the topic, which supports their emotional engagement and motivates their learning.

**Creative Development: Imagination and Expression:** The children use their imagination while watching the hot-air balloon video, discussing flying, and conducting experiments. They also express their ideas, theories, and observations through various mediums, such as verbal communication and hands-on activities.

### Discussion

The teachers involved in the abovementioned project have seamlessly intertwined play and learning, recognizing that imagination and realistic thinking are integral to children's and teachers' activities. Whether engaged in seemingly imaginative endeavors like creating paper airplanes or grounded in reality through outdoor observations of birds and insects, the teachers have skillfully blurred the lines between these realms. In this preschool project, learning becomes an intrinsic part of the children's developmental journey as they navigate and comprehend the world around them, employing methods such as exploration, experimentation, theorizing, and play.

The teachers deeply understand how play and exploration contribute to learning. Where fantasy and realism may coexist in perfect balance, exemplifying the intriguing way they responded to the question, "What must one do to fly?": "It looks as if I am flying!" This perspective stems from the power of hope, where we dare to imagine that things have meaning and actively seek to make sense of them. By nurturing such a mindset, we create a world where this learning approach becomes meaningful and transformative. It is as if by embodying the essence of flight, by allowing ourselves to appear as if we are soaring, we are instinctively taking the necessary steps towards unlocking the very possibility of flight itself. Early childhood education (ECE) methodologies in Pakistan, centered on curating environments that enable children's exploration, are steadily gaining recognition among educators and researchers. The growing focus on exploratory learning in Pakistani provinces is due to the play-based approach's significant influence, as Heckman noted in Hackman Equation, 1976. which strongly emphasizes exploration (Rinaldi, 2006). The reference provided by the user and the compelling response to the question are excellent examples of their analytical skills.

Several studies provide narrative explanations of the concept of exploration. These studies include the works of (De Freitas and Palmer, 2016; Elfstrom, 2013; Taguchi, 2009; Olsson 2009). The literal meaning of exploration in early childhood is still not clearly agreed upon by all. Murray (2012) suggests that exploration is a natural and exciting way for children to conduct research. Collaborative projects involving children and adults are a great way to encourage this exploration and foster a love of learning. Let us embrace curiosity and creativity together!

Recent Early Childhood Education (ECE) studies have investigated the link between play and learning via discovery. Building on the research of Sutton-Smith (1986); Hutt (1966); Volden et al (2014) examine how kids distinguish between play and exploration while engaging with mathematics on a Smartphone or tablet computer. The inquiry "What does this object do?" characterizes exploration and distinguishes it from play, as stated by Hutt et al (1989: 11), and the question "What can I do with this object?" is central to play. Although Hutt et al. classify both activities as 'play,' they do so by name, calling the former 'epistemic play' and the latter 'ludic play.'

Bird et al (2014) delve into the work of Hutt et al. by distinguishing between two forms of play: epistemic play and ludic play. They also incorporate Vygotsky's concept of tool mediation to illustrate how children acquire proficiency with new technologies, such as cameras, through epistemic play, which later translates into ludic play. While this linear process suggests that exploration paves the way for imaginative play, further exploration is needed as this conclusion overly emphasizes cognitive development. To adopt a more comprehensive perspective on children's learning and development, we must consider the interconnectedness of social, emotional, cultural, embodied, and cognitive processes (Ferholt, 2015).

Instead of solely associating learning with play-for-learning, let us contemplate a harmonious pairing of play and exploration, where learning is intrinsic to both activities. Figure 2 illustrates this notion. By doing so, we challenge the conventional approach that restricts learning to formal education and teaching and questions the dichotomy between imagination and reality. Let us imagine the children mentioned in the previous section. They love to pretend they can fly by wearing feathers. When they engage in this type of play, the feeling of flying becomes more critical than the feathers themselves or being in the air. Their imagination takes over,

and they act like they are soaring through the sky. This play captures the teachers' attention because they notice the children's fascination with flying. However, if we look at most of the children's activities, they are exploring and figuring out how things work. They come up with ideas and guesses to explain the objects they encounter. In this exploration phase, they think about different possibilities and try to understand the world around them.

It becomes clear that learning is essential to both play and discovery. In preschool, learning does not solely revolve around structured academic schooling. As depicted in Figure 2, children assign significance to objects and actions in play, thus creating meaning. In contrast, in exploratory work, significance is achieved via developing hypotheses and testing ideas. These meaning-making activities during play and exploration lead naturally to learning. As Vygotsky (1978) emphasized, the dynamic interaction between meaning-making and learning drives human growth.

Play	Achievement	Exploration
Imagination /reality: Learning emerges as a natural outcome of these meaning-making processes	⇒ <b>Learning and human-development</b>	Imagination /reality: The creation of a hypothesis is often motivated by objects, whether physical or conceptual.

Figure 2 is a conceptual diagram presenting the interrelation between play, exploration, and learning. In this model, play and exploration are closely linked with imagination and reality, indicating their inseparable nature.

The left box illustrates how play is a beautiful blend of imagination and reality, where the value of the experience outweighs the physical objects or actions involved. It is a delightful way to explore the world around us.; this implies that in the context of the play, children often attribute their own narratives to the objects or actions, underscoring the importance of imagination in the play process.

The right box presents exploration as another aspect of the blend of imagination and reality. However, the focus here is on the objects which inspire hypotheses and theorizing; This suggests that exploration involves an inquisitive process where individuals interact with their environment or objects within it, making conjectures and developing theories based on their observations.

The central box symbolizes learning, posited as an objective or product of both playing and exploration. The two arrows pointing toward this box signify that learning is not a standalone process but emerges from the interplay of play and exploration; this reinforces the idea that learning is a continuous and dynamic process deeply connected to one's experiences and interactions with the world around them.

We propose that Figure 2 serves as a valuable instrument for educators and researchers striving to combat factors such as child labor, parental obligations, and increased schoolwork all cut into kids' playtime, violating their human rights (United Nations Committee, 1989: 3). Our objective is for this reimagined conceptualization to encourage educators and researchers to cultivate a deeper and more functional comprehension of the interconnections between play, exploration, and learning.

**Conclusion**

Often seen as a process directed by a teacher with specific goals, teaching is a common descriptor for preschool practices in numerous countries. However, until recently, this has not been the case in Pakistan. The ramifications of this shift in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Pakistan are yet to be fully understood. The transmission teaching model could become the default approach in Pakistani preschools. Play, exploration, and learning need to be scrutinized within this local and global framework.

This paper presents an idea for a shift in perspective: the idea of the child engaged in play and exploration should take precedence over the child involved in play and learning (Pramling et al., 2008); this is a focal point in ECE. Furthermore, we argue that activities like playing and investigating include learning as an intrinsic aspect. Therefore, these two activities result in our next point of discussion: teaching.

Teaching and learning are distinct. Curricula and official documents can organize teaching. It can be arranged in various manners and executed with differing degrees of success. One can create an environment that either aids or hinders learning. It is crucial to understand that teaching does not directly lead to learning in a cause-effect manner, as highlighted by (Wenger, 1998; Saljo, 2014: 23).

The implications of teaching preschool children through play and exploration remain a mystery. Let us explore how too much teaching can hinder learning in preschool environments and find ways to promote optimal experiences for children.

Teaching often involves abstract, formal concepts. The Pakistani ECE curriculum connects these concepts with math, science, language, and technology. The timing, methods, and venues of imparting these scientific concepts within tangible preschool practices will hold immense significance for all preschool attendees.

Moreover, a thought-provoking inquiry captures our focus - can we place trust in the spontaneous processes during exploratory play to guarantee that children develop and internalize the essential social instruments and principles required for successfully navigating life, including scientific literacy? This matter indeed demands further exploration and research.

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