

# Educational Encounters as Emancipatory

Children and Educators as Beings and Becomings

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This article explores how teaching and play are conceptualised in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). It draws upon previous research to highlight a linguistic challenge related to “the talk of” and the prevalent logic of distinction. Specifically, it addresses how play and teaching, as fundamental concepts in ECEC, tend to create a division between children and educators, known as a logical distinction. To address this concern, the article uses relational theory and the concepts of being and becoming to provide an alternative way of discussing play and teaching in ECEC that transcends this logic of distinction. This alternative language emphasises freedom in the educational interactions between children and educators, thus moving away from the conventional dichotomy observed in the conceptualisation of play and teaching in ECEC.

Keywords: being and becoming, Early Childhood Education and Care, education, emancipation, encounters, relational theory.

## Introduction

The Swedish Education Act (2010:800, chapter 1, section 3) outlines the educational mission for all schools in Sweden. This implies that education is an overarching concept encompassing both play and teaching in preschool. A key distinction of preschool education in Sweden is that children are not required to meet specific knowledge standards (Eidevald et al. 2018). Early childhood education in the Nordic Region is based on a holistic tradition in which play, learning

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and care are fundamental (cf. Einarsdottir & Wagner 2006). Since 2010, teaching has been included in Sweden's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which can challenge the holistic tradition by positioning teaching and play as opposites. Inspired by the concept of Scholé (Masschelein & Simons 2013), which encompasses rest and freedom in education for both teachers and pupils, I explored the possibility of a new language for play and teaching within ECEC. In this article, I aim to explore the meaning of the terms play and teaching in the ECEC field to contribute a new perspective.

In the conceptualisation of play and teaching in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), a dominant language emerges that distinguishes play from teaching and children from educators as a logic of distinction.<sup>1</sup> Ann-Christine Vallberg Roth (2020) describes the logic of distinction in relation to the history and tradition of preschool (cf. Einarsdottir & Wagner 2006) as marking a boundary to the school. It is worth considering whether this logic, rooted in the tradition and ideology of ECEC, limits rather than opens up the unknown (Vallberg Roth 2020). The foundation of education on being open to the unknown and accepting risk-taking (cf. Biesta 2004, 2014) decreases when ECEC is based on traditions. Alistair MacIntyre (1977) elaborates on the concept of tradition, describing it as a paradox because referencing tradition also implies maintaining and adhering to it. MacIntyre argues that a tradition is only alive if it allows itself to be fundamentally questioned. He maintains that when tradition ceases to be questioned, it becomes dogma as a belief. This article argues that the tradition, as the conceptualisation of play and teaching in ECEC, is a problem concerning children and educators and their possible encounters. As John Dewey (1902) formulated: "a significant problem involves conditions that, for the moment, contradict each other. Solutions come only by getting away from the meaning of terms already fixed upon and seeing the conditions from another point of view, and hence in a fresh light" (p. 7). This article explores the question posed by Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Alan Pence (2014): "What other languages can we speak?" (p. 3). The inquiry emphasises that language shapes the narratives we construct around play and teaching, thereby influencing the interactions between children and educators in ECEC.

Judith Butler (1988) describes language as a construct rooted in our experiences, establishing limitations on how we understand and analyse the phenomena we encounter. Viewing language as a means of narrative construction encompasses spoken communication and written forms, such as research articles and popular science literature (cf. Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 2014, Butler 1988). This perspective

encourages exploration of play and teaching in ECEC to discover new ways of integrating children and educators. Ultimately, the objective is to highlight the interactions and connections rather than the divisions. These concepts can be redefined by recognising language as a creator of meaning in play and teaching within ECEC.

By applying relational theory (Sidorkin 2002, Biesta & Säfström 2011, Todd 2002, 2023) and the concepts of being and becoming (Uprichard 2008), this article explores the relationship between teaching and play, as well as the interactions between educators and children in ECEC, to contribute a new language. Relational theory and the concepts of being and becoming acknowledge a person in their presence, who they are here and now, as a being with experience and history entering education. In this setting, they become through both risks and opportunities in education (cf. Aspelin 2021, Biesta 2014, Säfström 2011, Todd 2002, 2023). Together, the concepts of being and becoming and relational theory offer an opportunity to change the language used to discuss play and teaching in ECEC, shifting away from a dualism grounded in logical distinctions. Exploring children's education through relational theory and the concepts of being and becoming presents a new perspective on children's education and their freedom. This new perspective aims to contribute to a language that views ECEC as an open and risk-taking venture for both children and educators. Exploring children's education through relational theory and the concepts of being and becoming is essential for making education expansive and risk-taking (cf. Biesta 2014), and for viewing ECEC as emancipatory for both children and educators:

We would suggest that if one wants to speak for education in a pedagogical way, it means expressing an interest in freedom and, more specifically, an interest in the freedom of the other – the freedom of the child, the freedom of the pupil, the freedom of the student. Freedom is not a license. It is not a question of “let go”, nor is it a matter of personal preference. Freedom is relational and, therefore, tricky. Pedagogical freedom is not about the absence of authority but about the authority that carries an orientation of freedom within itself. (Säfström & Biesta 2011, p. 84)

Exploring freedom and its existence in education between children and educators implies that educators are ascribed presence and autonomy. This perspective challenges the division of ECEC into a place for play, where freedom exists for children, and a place for teaching, where adults (educators) rule and freedom does not exist. First, the methodological approach will be presented. Thereafter, the theory

and previous research will be used as a case study to explore another possible language.

## Reading with as a method

The empirical material forming the basis for this case study consists of selected articles and political discussions, where play and teaching in ECEC constitute a problem concerning educators and children. The inspiration to use “read with” as an analytical tool is drawn from Nina Johannesen (2013), aiming to contribute a new language for discussing play and teaching in ECEC. The case method is informed by Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman (2011), who describe the case-study approach in the context of theory development. The case study consists of examining materials as they are, without any preconceived notions of where the analysis will lead (Alvesson & Kärreman 2011). In this initial reading, the researcher oscillates between the material, their thoughts, notes and theory (Alvesson & Kärreman 2011). New ideas and insights emerge from this iterative process.

## Relational theory

The following paragraph describes and discusses relational theory as an introduction to pedagogical relationships in education. The theory is then aligned with previous research exploring “the talk of” play and teaching in ECEC.

The relationship between people and between people and objects is at the heart of relational theory (Bingham & Sidorkin et al. 2004). Ontologically, relational theory assumes that what primarily exists is a relation rather than entities such as things and individual human beings. According to Alexander Sidorkin (2002), entities cannot know or be unknown, nor can they change or be changed outside of the relation. Sidorkin’s starting point for relational ontology is thus based on the interweaving of people and things in the world, thus demonstrating that the fundamental reality of this world is relation. Relations cannot belong to one thing: they are the joint property of at least two things joined in a relationship. The relational theory emphasises the significance of the present moment in education, seeing it as a facet of experiencing freedom (Aspelin 2021, Biesta & Säfström 2011, Todd 2023). With this understanding, the relations between educators and children are central. However, as Sidorkin (2002)

explains, this understanding of education entails not only human-to-human relationships but also objects (cf. Todd 2023).

As shown through the lens of Sidorkin (2002), relational theory is centred on relationships and understanding the world through these relationships. For Moira Von Wright (2002) and Sharon Todd (2023), relational theory is closely linked to a pluralistic understanding of the world, which opens the door to an altruistic rather than an egocentric understanding:

Thinking from the perspective of somebody else, from the standpoints of *homines aperti*, as an open self rather than an egocentric closed self, makes it possible to feel compassion and understanding without falling into limitless empathy and losing respect for the otherness of the other. (Von Wright 2002, p. 4)

Von Wright argues that we construct and are constructed in our conception of other people. Instead of starting from an egocentric point of view, Von Wright argues that we should try to understand others with openness, thus creating conditions for non-egocentric encounters. In a pedagogical relationship, being part of education with others and objects involves being observant of their performance and allowing the person with whom we interact to be present as they are (cf. Todd 2023). In this way, we are interwoven and moved in our encounters with others (cf. Sidorkin 2002, Todd 2023). The pedagogical relationship, as described, enables what Carl-Anders Säfström (2011) refers to as the “order of truth” and the disturbance of that order. Säfström (2011) argues: “Emancipation, which I understand to be central for any conception of ‘education’, always happens in the interplay between ‘the order of truth’ and the disturbance of that order” (p. 300). He locates emancipation within education, viewing education as a disturbance between humans or between humans and objects, which relates to relational theory.

In relational theory, freedom arises in education and through educational encounters. In interaction with others, experiences and knowledge can connect and collide but simultaneously be moved and changed, understood as freedom in and through education (Biesta & Säfström 2011). Education is then about being present with others in a specific context (Todd 2002), for example, in a preschool with children of different ages and adults working as their educators. Identifying freedom or emancipation as part of education, located between people and their encounters, indicates that the context is essential for how the relations can emerge, given that different contexts represent different languages in how education is understood. The context and

relational theory acknowledge the nuanced understanding, diversity, and pluralism of the pedagogical relationships. Relational pedagogy is a process in education that begins with who we are and extends to who we can become in the world. This exchange signals that the person is transferring:

As it focuses on process and exchange, pedagogy enables us to think about how our becoming someone is necessarily transformative. That is, it does not assume that we exist outside of these exchanges by virtue of our birth; instead, each one of us is engaged in a process of becoming that is relational and ongoing. (Todd 2002, p. 5)

Todd argues that using the term pedagogy highlights the significance of relational encounters for our becoming. It does not primarily focus on achievements but, as Sidorkin (2002) states, places relations at the heart of how we understand the world. Relational theory aligns closely with Emma Uprichard's (2008) notion of a child as simultaneously being and becoming by focusing on both the future and the present.

### Being and becoming

Although Uprichard (2008) does not begin with relational theory, her concept of being and becoming aligns with Todd's (2002, 2023) ideas on process, movement and presence. Uprichard critiques the idea of the child as perpetually in a state of becoming, arguing that this excessive focus on the child's future – whether as an adult or a citizen – shifts attention away from the present. Instead, she argues for recognising the child's present state – the here and now – as interwoven with becoming rather than opposing it. Children, she suggests, alternate between being and becoming based on contexts and interactions (Uprichard 2008). Recognising both being and becoming in children and educators highlights their equal importance in the educational relationship. This equality does not extend to the question of responsibility, which lies with the educator who interacts with the children. However, both children and educators can transfer and adapt knowledge within the educational process. This dynamic involves the risks of openness and the unknown, as Gert Biesta (2006) described. The pedagogical relationship is characterised by altruism and a pluralistic approach, as it develops in the presence of others.

The key aspect of this relationship is the contributions of others, which make the pedagogical relationship open and unknown (Von Wright 2002, Todd 2002, Biesta 2006). Uprichard (2008) emphasises

understanding the child not just as a static being, but as a dynamic individual in the process of becoming. This process includes interactions with others and various elements involved in education. In Biesta's (2014) description of education, neither the child nor the adult is specified; education involves interaction where both an opening and risk-taking are possible, leading to emancipation and a flow between being and becoming.

Using Uprichard's (2008) conceptualisation of being and becoming a child and adding relational theory, this article identifies educators as adults who can be and become in education. Relational theory offers a language of education that exists between people in ECEC. It suggests that interaction between educators and children, encompassing both being and becoming, can occur regardless of age, play, or teaching. This article identifies being and becoming interwoven with relational theory.

### "The talk of" play and teaching as a case

The following section presents a case study (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman 2011) that can serve as a basis for exploring and enabling the contribution of another language to play and teaching in ECEC. The aim is not to present all research within the field of ECEC concerning play and teaching. Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson and Camilla Björklund (2022) discuss the large amount of research that explores play in preschool and highlights some common positions, which makes it possible not to present all the research. Instead, they focus on common features.

The large body of research that explores play in ECEC has origins in different perspectives and different theoretical cornerstones, based on what the particular study aims at developing understanding of. However, the research has, in common, some features that may help outline what constitutes the so-called play-based pedagogy in ECEC. First, the child is an agent in his/her learning. Second, the role of the teacher has been re-defined by many, deprecating from the traditional role of an instructor, based on the idea that the context of ECEC cannot include giving instructions and at the same time preparing for an exploring-friendly environment. Nevertheless, there is still debate about if, how and why teachers should involve themselves in play for educational purposes. (Samuelsson & Björklund 2022, p. 310)

Considering the numerous ECEC studies, the present article's exploration is built upon a case study continuing what Pramling Samuelsson

and Björklund (2022) call a debate. It focuses on “the talk of” play and teaching, drawing on examples from previous research and political discussions. As Ulla Lind (2001) proclaims in *Positions in Swedish Child Education Research, a Knowledge Overview*, the texts forming the basis of a case study are selected because they provide a foundation for exploration.

Almost three decades ago, the Swedish government decided to re-organise childcare from the Ministry of Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education (Eidevald & Engdahl 2018). The shift was part of political discussions that later led to the inclusion of the concept of teaching in the revisited preschool curriculum of 2018 (Swedish National Agency for Education 2018). In recent years, research on children’s play in ECEC has increased in response to curriculums emphasising goal orientation and teaching (cf. Edwards 2017, Fler 2011, Pramling et al. 2022, Vallberg Roth 2018, Wood 2014). The identified challenge is how children can continue to play freely while educators teach without compromising children’s free play (Fler 2011, Nilsson et al. 2018, Van Oers & Duijkers 2013).

Early debates reveal concerns about what the concept of teaching in Swedish preschool might mean for children if the focus shifts from play to teaching, with a curriculum regulating the content (Dahlberg et al. 2014, Pramling Samuelsson & Björklund 2022). Teaching is thus associated with schoolification, referring to the more regulated, goal-oriented curriculums (Brogaard Clausen 2015, Wahlgren 2023). Political debates indicate that the shift from the Ministry of Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education risks undermining children’s play as a foundation for their development and their right to be children. A curriculum may be suitable for older children and those about to start primary school, but what purpose does it serve for a 1-, 2- or 3-year-old? The politician Britt-Marie Danestig addresses this concern in Speech 134 of Bill 1997/98:93:

Understanding children’s play was one of the foundations of Fröbel’s pedagogy. I think he said something like this: “Play is the heart leaf of life to come.” That is so nice. Because it is through play that children develop socially, emotionally, motorically and intellectually. Moreover, it is important that children have the right to be children. Therefore, the idea of an early childhood school where children are forced too early into learning situations determined by adults is discouraging. We believe that preschool must not be “schooled” in a negative sense. (<http://data.riksdagen.se/dokument/GL09115> last accessed 2023-09-11, translation by the author)



Above, Danestig emphasises that preschool must not be “schoolled” in a negative sense. She points out that a curriculum could force children to learn in situations determined by adults. In other words, schoolification can be interpreted as threatening children’s development on their terms, thus contrasting with a holistic tradition of play, learning and care (cf. Brogaard Clausen 2015, Wahlgren 2023). However, the concept also contributes to a division of children and educators in ECEC. The quote emphasises play as being at the heart of children’s development; as Laura Camas Garrido (2018) notes, play is a place where children have the right to be children.

Previous research presents different views regarding play and teaching, focusing on the importance of children’s free play (cf. Wood 2014, Sundsdal & Øksnes 2015) and exploring the potential integration of teaching and play (cf. Björklund & Palmér 2019, Pramling et al. 2019, Fleeer 2011). Terms such as “open,” “free,” “goal-oriented” and “formal” are used to distinguish between play and teaching in ECEC research. Camas Garrido’s (2018) article, “Children’s Play and Democratic Culture,” questions the teacher’s role in children’s play and free play. The article highlights how teachers support children’s play, the educational strategy they use and the protection of free play. It also emphasises that children’s free play is an essential part of experiencing the richness of childhood. In their theoretical exploration of a distinct preschool pedagogy, Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson and Maj Asplund Carlsson (2008) connect play and learning as the foundation for preschool pedagogy.

Young children are different from school children, not just because they have yet to learn to be school children, which for many children means taking instructions and waiting for their teacher to give a response. Young children are active “by nature.” They are constantly “on-going!” (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson 2008, p. 16)

They state that play and learning are natural components of a child’s life. When asked what they like to do best, children unanimously respond: play.

Camilla Björklund and Hanna Palmér (2019) describe play and teaching in ECEC as a meeting between the openness of play and goal-oriented teaching. They highlight advocates who describe the importance of allowing children to play undisturbed from adults, thus contrasting with those who support the integration of teaching into play (Doverborg et al. 2017, Pramling et al. 2019). Previous research reveals a relationship between play and freedom, where “free” is often

considered “free from adults,” a concept accredited to children’s play (Sundstal & Øksnes 2015, Van Oers & Duijkers 2013). The importance of being free differs in the context of play and teaching, as well as for children and educators. Children’s freedom is associated with their ability to play independently. Bert Van Oers and Debbie Duijkers (2013) describe the debate as follows:

The debate on adult participation in play is primarily based on play rhetoric, advocating freedom, pleasure, fantasy, and purposelessness. The discussion often concentrates on whether children’s activity can be called play when rules or goal-directed actions *constrain it*. (p. 6)

Torill Strand (2006) examines the epistemological foundations of ECEC in Norway, where these foundations, termed “educational beliefs,” are actively shaped, reconfigured and justified through social practices and representations within the field. The study reveals certain shared myths that underpin the description and understanding of ECEC, underlining discussions and what constitutes a “good childhood” as an integral aspect of ECEC in Norway. Interestingly, the researchers involved chose not to use the term Early Childhood Education as a collective label for their focus. Instead, they suggested terms like “play pedagogy” or “the education and upbringing of children before school age” (Strand 2006). In the Nordic ideology and tradition, key ideas such as democracy, freedom and emancipation coexist with the notion of a “good childhood” (Wagner & Einarsdottir 2006). However, this tradition may unintentionally create a distinction between children and educators, as well as between teaching and play. This distinction arises from the emphasis on children’s freedom, specifically related to playing without adult intervention.

The idea that children cannot truly be children if they are not allowed to play freely without educators identifies two key points: first, a lack of trust in educators’ actions, and second, the belief that children’s agency – the ability to make choices and act independently – only exists in play that is free from educators’ intervention (cf. Sundstal & Øksnes 2015, Van Oers & Duijkers 2013). In other words, integrating teaching into play risks undermining children’s play and increasing adults’ control. Previous research has linked the curriculum and governance to the complex relationship between play and teaching in ECEC (Eidevald & Engdahl 2019, Nilsson, Lecusay & Alnervik 2018).

A common conceptualisation is that play is a space for children, while teaching is a space for educators (Nilsen 2021, Pramling et al.

2019). The challenge with this conceptualisation in ECEC can be argued to stem from a tradition of separating it from the school system (Vallberg Roth 2020). In an effort to foster pedagogy or *didaktik* for ECEC, a distance is created from the school system (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson 2008).<sup>2</sup> Descriptions of play highlight this distancing as a free space or a place for children's creativity, which is seen as a central starting point for preschool development (Van Oers & Duijkers 2013). At the same time, teaching is often described as instructive and managed by adults (Johansson & Pramling 2006, Strand 2006). The problem with this conceptualisation is that it stems from a dualistic perception, which contributes to a division between children and educators. As a result, a dichotomous relationship emerges, not only regarding play and teaching but also between children and educators, thus affecting their encounters and the concept of freedom in ECEC. The contradiction presents a complex educational situation for both educators and children in ECEC. It is not merely about play or teaching but the ontological understanding of education in ECEC. In the next section, the ontological foundation of this article will be interwoven with previous research that is explored through the lens of relational theory and the concepts of being and becoming.

## Exploring and reading with relational theory and being and becoming

In light of the question regarding what alternative language can be used for discussing ECEC, this article uses previous research as a case study to contribute a new perspective. The introduction references Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2014), who raises the question of how to talk about education in ECEC differently. They argue that how preschool education is presented and created depends on how education in ECEC is written or talked about. Through language, the relationships among those involved in preschool education shape the understanding of what education in preschool means (Butler 1988). This understanding is then connected to the relations between objects (such as research), people (such as practitioners or researchers) and reality (education in preschool), all of which are interconnected (cf. Sidorkin 2002, Butler 1988).

Therefore, exploring play and teaching in ECEC through relational theory suggests that education aims to foster multiple interactions and relationships, thereby creating a bundle that includes the self and emancipation (Biesta & Säfström 2011, Todd 2003). Education is

about creating different relationships to understand the world and its people, which Sidorkin (2002) identifies as the true aim of education. According to Sidorkin, a key skill in understanding education through relational ontology is the ability to hear what has yet to be said, to articulate what children (students) cannot articulate, and to engage in dialogue when the other party may not be willing or ready. Understanding human relations relies heavily on the heightened ability to listen and respond without preconceived notions of truth (Todd 2003).

When applied to ECEC, this understanding of education brings a perspective in which separating play and teaching is pointless, given that relationships need people and things to engage and challenge each other (Biesta & Säfström 2011). As Todd (2003) argues, education is about listening, seeing and responding to each other. This suggests that the recognition of emancipation or freedom is embedded in the educational context and manifests through relationships and interactions involving individuals, entities and our engagement with the world (cf. Biesta & Säfström 2011). Within ECEC, such interactions may transpire within preschool settings as sites for relational engagements between children and educators. Adopting a relational perspective allows for exploring how ECEC can facilitate a connection between educators and children, irrespective of factors such as play, teaching or age (cf. Biesta & Säfström 2011, Biesta 2014). This perspective acknowledges the fluid and interrelated nature of being and becoming within the pedagogical relationship (Uprichard 2008, Todd 2002).

This acknowledgement stems from the understanding that one's current state of being, when juxtaposed with others or educational content as an object, can generate dynamics that lead to a progression toward becoming. This perspective contrasts with previous research, which often focuses on children's development and future in ECEC, thus neglecting the concept of educators as beings in the process of becoming. By integrating the concepts of being and becoming with relational theory, this article recognises the intertwined influences of these concepts on both children and educators. The educational relationship is where emancipation arises, as it offers both risks, such as openings, and the opportunity to act, regardless of age (Biesta & Säfström 2011). Therefore, being and becoming are equally relevant to children and educators in ECEC.

Relationships affect interaction and content in different ways. This implies that everyone involved in education has the opportunity to influence the content, with each person's individual experience playing a role in how the content is understood or how it can be challenging (Biesta & Säfström 2011, Todd 2023). The open and unknown are

acknowledged when both children and educators are considered equally important in education.

Understanding freedom in education as relational and ethical between educators and children means that being and becoming are interconnected with educational encounters (Todd 2023, Uprichard 2008). This article suggests that, rather than having an education system that separates children from educators through play and teaching, what is essential for preschool education is the development of relationships that encourage openness and risk-taking between children and educators. Drawing on relational theory and the concepts of being and becoming, it emphasises the importance of fostering educational movements and promoting educational freedom. As Todd (2023) suggests, education occurs through the connections formed in encounters:

Through these lenses, my intent is not to tell educators (or artists or activists or anyone else for that matter) what they/I should be doing but to open up questions that might inform what encounters can become in educational settings, what they can lead to, and how they inform a central element in any educational practice. In this, I am not interested in offering a theory of encounter (in the singular) that can then be applied to education but to take seriously what transpires in and through encounters (in the plural) to better understand what education is capable of. (p. 9)

The relational theoretical perspective and concepts of being and becoming offer a new language for children's education in ECEC. Here, play and teaching are not the primary focus; instead, the focus is on how educators and children engage together within an educational framework where freedom is encountered through a curriculum.

## Towards another language

There is a need for a new perspective – a fresh light on play and teaching in ECEC. This fresh light is necessary because the conflicting elements, free and open, are ascribed to play and children being on their own (cf. Sundsdal & Øksnes 2015, Van Oers & Duijkers 2013, Wood 2014). Conversely, teaching is described as instrumental and adult-driven (cf. Johansson & Pramling 2006, Strand 2006, Vallberg Roth 2020). The current positioning of play and teaching conflicts with an understanding of education as a harmonious process where emancipation and freedom arise in interactions between people and their encounters with the world.

Previous research situates the discourse of children's autonomy within the context of play, underscoring that children are free when they play (Sundstal & Øksnes 2015, Van Oers & Duijkers 2013). In the Nordic tradition, ECEC has placed significant value on play, connecting it to children's well-being and their preferences (Pramling et al. 2008, Einarsdottir et al. 2006). However, suppose the understanding of freedom or emancipation continues to be tethered to a traditional framework (cf. Vallberg Roth 2020), which suggests these phenomena only arise when children and educators are separated. In that case, there is a potential risk of perpetuating a distinct categorisation of play, teaching, children and educators in ECEC, reinforcing existing logic and dogma. Such a logical distinction not only divides play and teaching but also segregates children and educators, leading to the emergence of otherness. This manifests in children's freedom during play, instrumental teaching and educators' control. However, as Dewey (1902) points out: "Solutions come only by getting away from the meaning of terms already fixed upon" (p. 7).

Given this, the present article posits that adopting a language rooted in relational theory and the concepts of being and becoming places the interaction between educators and children in ECEC at the forefront. This approach helps us move beyond the traditional meanings of play and teaching. By delving into and interpreting previous research through relational theory (Sidorkin 2002, Biesta & Säfström 2011, Todd 2003, 2023) and the concepts of being and becoming (Uprichard 2008), a new language emerges for discussing play and teaching in ECEC. Relational theory asserts that freedom is not inherent in a specific action but arises within the educational interactions and encounters (Biesta & Säfström 2011, Säfström 2011).

Through exploring and interpreting previous research using relational theory and the concepts of being and becoming, this article contributes a language that situates the freedom of education within the interactions between children and educators. Freedom is not engendered by the separation of children and educators but through their collaborative engagement in education (Biesta & Säfström 2011, Sidorkin 2002). By identifying the central role of encounters between children and educators, freedom is attributed to both groups, as education, through relational theory, affects all participants. The previous conceptualisation of children as beings and becomings (Uprichard 2008) also involves educators when employing a relational language in ECEC. Both children and educators are integral to education and bring diverse experiences (Todd 2023). Thus, educators and children are identified as beings and becomings in ECEC.

Relational theory offers a pedagogical relationship where freedom is encountered through education and is contingent on the interactions between children and educators (Biesta & Säfström 2011, Biesta 2004, 2014, Todd 2002). This perspective recognises children and educators as beings but also as becomings. Both groups oscillate between being and becoming, depending on their educational encounters. Through a reading with relational theory and the concepts of being and becoming, it is identified that neither play nor teaching in isolation contributes to emancipation. Instead, emancipation is related to the relations and interactions between educators, children and their surroundings in ECEC. The language of relational theory acknowledges the plurality of experiences for both children and educators, regardless of age. Individuals enter education as beings with pre-existing experiences, and these diverse experiences may conflict or harmonise through encounters in education.

The present article recognises being and becoming as interconnected, as one's identity can transform and oscillate between these educational states. Instead of adhering to preschool traditions that divide education for children and educators into play and teaching, we can explore ECEC to reconcile both groups. When children's freedom is solely associated with play in preschool, where children play independently without educators, and teaching is seen as goal-orientated and instrumental without freedom and educators in control, it conflicts with the concept of educators and children as beings and becomings. This perspective underlines the importance of educational encounters as freedom within education.

## Discussion

The present article commenced with a call for an alternative language to discuss Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), aiming to move away from the logic of distinction. The objective was to explore previous research and political discussions as a case study through the lens of relational theory and the concepts of being and becoming. The intention is to contribute an alternative language for addressing the notions of play, teaching, children and educators in ECEC. Critically, the present article does not address all the literature on play and teaching in the field of ECEC. Instead, it selectively includes works that offer insights into developing a new language to discuss play and teaching. However, as with all research, selections are made based on identified problems, juxtapositions and other factors. Exploring previous research on play and teaching in ECEC through the lens of

relational theory proposes a language where being and becoming are described as interdependent. When relational theory and the concepts of being and becoming are prioritised in ECEC, the question of freedom shifts from being dependent on play to relying on educational encounters between children and educators.

### Notes

1. In the following article, the logic of distinction is based on Bourdieu's (1984) definition, where he argues that no one in a society can escape distinction. The logic of distinction arises in groups and between groups to distinguish between groups and objects in a society, which implies that something or someone is understood to have a higher value than something else. The distinction appears and is maintained, through language and/or structures, by those who are part of the same context, thus becoming logical.
2. I use the German word "Didaktik" (with a "k"), which is common in the Didaktik tradition in the continental Europe and the Nordic countries, rather than the Anglo-Saxon term "didactics".

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