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Review of Berti, F. & Seitz, S. (2025). The primary school as a playful space. Theories and practices in an international perspective.

Anne Clerc-Georgy

This volume, edited by Francesca Berti and Simone Seitz, offers an in-depth reflection on the role of play in primary school from an international perspective, drawing primarily on Italian, German, and Scottish contexts. Starting from the observation that play is widely recognised as a mode of learning in early childhood education, yet remains comparatively underexplored at the primary level, the contributions gathered in this volume aim to address both a theoretical and an empirical gap in educational research.

The main contribution of the book lies in its new conceptualisation of play, which is not treated as a mere pedagogical technique but rather as a genuine “way of doing” that opens multiple opportunities for children’s action, participation, and engagement. The authors describe primary school as a *playful space*, bringing together a wide range of playful activities that are more or less teacher-directed as well as the creation of environments that foster *playfulness*, understood as a playful attitude characterised by curiosity, openness, and exploration.

From this perspective, play in primary school is viewed as a lever for enhancing educational continuity: between early childhood education and primary school, between formal and informal learning, and between the prescribed curriculum and children’s lived experiences. This approach is explicitly grounded in an inclusive orientation aimed at promoting greater educational justice. The editors also emphasise the importance of addressing teachers’ perceptions, beliefs, and professional practices regarding the role of play at school. Rather than opposing play and learning, the book invites readers to rethink the school environment along several dimensions conducive to the creation of a playful space: a discovery-oriented approach to learning, flexible and varied spaces, different forms of play—free or guided, traditional or educational—and resources that balance structured and unstructured play.

Across the chapters, play and learning are consistently presented as inseparable when implementing pedagogical approaches that aim to include all children, support their agency, foster imagination, and develop self-regulation skills. In this sense, the volume contributes to

rethinking the place and role of play in primary education and opens numerous avenues for teachers, teacher educators and researchers interested in pupils' wellbeing, motivation, and learning processes.

The book is organised into five sections, each addressing the topic of play in primary school from complementary perspectives: conceptual, experiential, and practical. These sections focus on theoretical frameworks, wellbeing at school, forms of playful learning, narrative play and storytelling, and concrete practices that contribute to the construction of a playful school environment.

The **first section**, *Conceptual Frameworks*, provides the theoretical foundations of the book and analyses play from epistemological and pedagogical perspectives. Play is conceptualised as an educational frame rather than as a teaching method. It allows for a rethinking of school transitions, learning spaces, and teaching practices, as it simultaneously supports learning, wellbeing, and children's agency. The first chapter (Müller, Dunlop, and Pfeiffer) addresses the transition from early childhood education to primary school. Drawing on examples from Germany and Scotland, the authors show how play can foster educational continuity and serve as a lever for pedagogical transformation in support of equal opportunities. The second chapter (Lohfeld) analyses primary school as a potential space for play, highlighting how the design of school spaces strongly conditions pupils' opportunities for play and participation. In the third chapter, Zuccoli examines the place of play in contemporary school contexts and emphasises its role as a cultural, creative, and relational device that connects imagination, learning, and meaning, with particular attention to the choice of materials. Finally, in the fourth chapter, Farné offers a critical reflection on the instrumentalisation of play arguing that reducing play to a simple pedagogical tool risks undermining its intrinsic educational value. This chapter contributes to the broader debate on the legitimisation of play at school as an activity grounded in freedom, uncertainty, pleasure, and relational dimensions.

The **second section**, *Wellbeing at School*, focuses on wellbeing as an intrinsic quality of school experience and as a condition for high-quality learning. Wellbeing is closely linked to playfulness, motivation, pupils' agency, and participation. The four chapters in this section address play as a revealer of pupils' lifeworlds (Brenner), the development of life skills through the PALS programme (Weidinger et al.), the socio-emotional training of teachers through cooperative games (Malusà), and the practice of risky play and the ethical tensions it raises across different educational contexts (Masseretti).

The **third section**, *Forms of Playful Learning*, explores various playful approaches to learning across disciplines. Moser highlights the fundamental role of play—both free and didactic—in learning processes in primary school, while Barca argues that play constitutes “serious work”

contributing to children's holistic development. Wagner and Zehbe analyse playful learning in History education through the use of objects, adopting a sensory, narrative, and participatory approach. Herrmann and Egerer examine writing practices as playful activities supported by both digital and analogue tools. Nickel presents literacy centres as environments that foster language learning through play, while Pelizzari and Marangi offer a critical analysis of video games as cultural and educational practices.

The **fourth section**, *Narrative Play and Storytelling*, examines the value of narration as an educational and relational tool supporting meaning-making, identity construction, and playful learning. Hoffmann analyses the use of wordless picture books as resources for collective narrative play that foster imagination and linguistic inclusion. Von Leon conceptualises picture books as participatory play objects, while Casadei, Baroni, and Gelmi explore the use of *kamishibai* as a narrative play device combining orality, performance, and collective participation. In the last chapter of this section, Schlauch investigates experiences of narrative learning, highlighting the links between storytelling, play, wellbeing, and meaningful learning.

The **fifth and final section**, *Best Practices*, devoted to "best practices", presents school-based initiatives and research projects aimed at developing more playful educational environments. The contributions include projects conducted in natural settings that combine play, narration, music, and science (Landini et al.), analyses of the potential of play to deconstruct stereotypes and promote inclusion (Pacetti and Baiata), the integration of play into the organisation of school time in support of educational continuity (Ferrero), playful and creative uses of digital tools in the classroom (Menegola), and tinkering as a form of scientific play fostering curiosity and scientific thinking (Rini and Ricciardi).

To conclude, I can say that this volume represents an original, rich, and stimulating contribution to contemporary reflections on the role of play in primary education. By articulating epistemological reflections, theoretical frameworks, empirical research, and pedagogical practices, it offers valuable insights for researchers, teacher educators and practitioners seeking to rethink primary school as a space that supports learning, wellbeing, and inclusion. This opus thus makes a significant contribution to ongoing debates on the purposes of education and the conditions for a more equitable school system that is attentive to children's perspectives.