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Starting with play: taking play seriously

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Summary

While the majority of policy makers involved in early childhood education and care still seem to underestimate play, this chapter will argue that play is a fundamental, innate characteristic of childhood. Play's excellence lies in its capacity to motivate children and engender positive, long-lasting learning dispositions. Play has been observed in almost every culture in the world and it has influenced learning over centuries.

This chapter will discuss the challenges of defining play and the many different attributes of play that make it a unique process in children's learning and development. It will offer a broad background to play and learning theories, and the links with practice and practitioner reflection.

Introduction

The challenges facing practitioners in resolving dilemmas between policy and play practices (Chapter 1) are both very real and very frustrating, as the comments below show.

There is a continual dilemma between practitioners' wish to support more play-focused learning and the downward pressures from school leadership and targets. Many young children still experience a very adult-directed environment and there is a lack of pedagogical knowledge of child development and play in some early years teachers in schools.

(LEA advisor)

Reception classes have moved on from opportunities to socialise, learn playfully and engage in new experiences to a preparation for compulsory education ... an extension of formal schooling ... I have a very able five year old ... but have noticed that since entering reception

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he is overly competitive, easily upset, loses confidence very quickly when he doesn't understand something instantly and requires immediate gratification.

(Parent)

There is still a lack of understanding and knowledge of how children learn and play ... Reception classes tend to be too formal for the needs and abilities of young children ... many boys start the system as failures.

(Nursery nurse)

I feel strongly that within reception classes children are being short-changed and that a lack of understanding by teachers and OfSTED of play-based approaches is primarily the cause of this.

(Reception class teacher)

It's infuriating to me that, a quarter of a century on from the publication of *Just Playing?* (Moyles, 1989) and more than 20 years since the first edition of *The Excellence of Play*, we should still be questioning the value of play in children's learning and development, especially since so much has been researched and written about the nature and value of play in the education and holistic development of young children in the intervening years. Some might say that it's a good thing we're still exploring how children learn and the best ways to support that learning, but it seems to me that continually having to challenge 'the system' and fight for play when the fight should have already been won, takes energy that would best be expended on developing more effective and playful pedagogies. One has only to think of the pedagogical qualities valued in, for example, the Reggio Emilia and Te Whariki approaches to realise the full potential of play-based, child-initiated early childhood curricula.

Yet society, through government, seems to believe that children can learn only when they are formally taught and the earlier that occurs the better, whereas there is much evidence to the contrary. A simple way to counteract this is to stop and ask ourselves, is what I know now and understand only what I was directly taught? As Gray (2014) points out, most of the knowledge and understanding we use in our everyday lives was decidedly *not* that which we were formally taught.

Politicians, parents and practitioners alike must remember that children have the *right* to play, enshrined in international law, irrespective of their individual or special needs, disability, language, culture, background,

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gender or behaviour:

Research evidence highlights that playing is ... central to children's spontaneous drive for development, and that it performs a significant role in the development of the brain, particularly in the early years.

(UNCRC, 2013: para. 9F)

With fewer occasions for play outside early education, it is even more important that children today have opportunities for quality play within their early education environments. For each child to be able to play in their own way, their individual needs and dispositions have to be taken into account. Treating children equally does not mean treating them all the same. The rich cultural heritages that children bring with them often become manifest in their play, and are part of understanding and catering for the 'unique child'. One wonders how this unique child can be 'falling behind' at age four!

Children in the UK start formal schooling at a younger age than almost any others around the world, yet seem to have increasingly fewer and fewer opportunities to play, as the respondents above rue. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfES, 2013) has scant mention of play in its 29-page document. We seem hell-bent on preventing children from engaging in play experiences despite the fact that we know play is an integral and essential part of a healthy childhood (and adulthood). According to Gray (2014: 12), the dramatic decline in opportunities for children to play 'has been accompanied by an equally dramatic increase in childhood mental disorders' and we are aware, too, of the ever increasing problem with childhood obesity. The difficulty appears to lie with acknowledging that issues such as 'school readiness' and 'assessment' have very formal connotations for those with little knowledge of children's mental and physical early development, remembering as they frequently do only those experiences from their own later childhoods – 'Doing tests never did me any harm' – so it must be fine to assess very young children, even two year olds. This attitude underestimates the pressure that such tests place not only on such young children, however kindly conducted, but on practitioners and parents who rightly aspire to the best for their children. As Katz remarks, in referring to what she calls the 'push down' phenomenon, 'this concept seems to result in doing earlier and earlier to young children what probably should not be done to them later either!' (2014: 216). Assessing children through observation of their play

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experiences is a far more reliable and valid way of understanding their individual strengths and needs, albeit a very skilled and analytic process.

Some of the challenges of play arise from the fact that ‘teaching’ is perceived by most parents, policy makers and practitioners to be a formal activity – and has been for well over a century. We need now to think of pedagogy – and playful pedagogy at that (Moyses, 2010) – rather than just ‘teaching’, and embrace a diverse range of deeper learning and teaching practices if we are to serve twenty-first century children and support them into a confident and competent adulthood. These involve practitioners letting go of sometimes long-established values in relation to schooling and recognising what it is that children achieve in deep, meaningful play. Let’s face it, education and learning start long before children enter ‘schooling’: these earlier life and learning experiences are brought into settings and should be the firm basis for curriculum and pedagogy.

In this chapter, I shall first approach the vexing issue of defining play before turning respectively to play as a learning process and playful, reflective pedagogies.

Determining what is play: catching bubbles

Grappling with the concept of play can be analogous to trying to seize bubbles, for every time there appears to be something to hold on to, its ephemeral nature disallows it being grasped. Activities can look like play without actually being play – for example, children may be ‘playing’ with letters to make up words but if this is a teacher-driven activity, it may be playful teaching but it may not be play in the eyes of the child.

But do we need a definition in order to be able to value play? Surely simply observing what children experience in play ought to be sufficient in itself to convince intelligent adults that it is eminently worthwhile? The nearest we perhaps get to determining what is play is to say:

In play, everything is possible with reality often disregarded and imagination and free-flow thinking taking precedence. Play is a highly creative process, using body and mind; it is flexible and often free from externally imposed goals ... It has positive, often pleasurable, effects on the players and frequently involves deep commitment and deep level learning. Play develops and changes over time ... from basic repetitive and pleasurable actions and vocalisations to highly intellectual and collaborative processes. Above all play offers children freedom, choice and control over some aspects of their lives, experiences they are rarely

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afforded in an inevitably adult-led world. Play is a context in which children's voices can be clearly heard.

(Moyles, 2013: 2)

and we could add, heeded, if we're prepared as practitioners to listen!

Play is nature's way of enabling the development of a range of concepts, skills, dispositions, knowledge of the world and other people, their own capabilities and values that it would be difficult for children to acquire in any other way because of their lack of life experiences. At age five, children have lived only 60 months (just 1,825 days) in the world. We need to remember this, and just how many different experiences children need to extend and enhance their cognitive functioning – a narrow diet of synthetic phonics or number crunching, for example, is a limited and limiting experience, and also has little meaning to most young children.

Yet, in many ways, play can represent a seemingly long route to learning – for example, a child kicking a ball up against a wall over and over again, or a baby throwing a spoon on the floor repeatedly. This may seem like a waste of time to those observing, but isn't it true that nature does not tolerate waste? Play must have been 'invented' by nature for some good purpose: as an aid to effective, pleasurable, joyful, intense learning. We can all learn in different ways but, if you're like me, being told something involves only a fraction of my learning: doing things for myself and finding out – as children do in their play – is a far superior way to learn, especially when experiences are new.

It is obvious when one observes children engaged in self-initiated play that they are learning from the experience, even if it can't be quantified (Smith, 2005). Play is an observable behaviour but it is also a process: being playful is a worthwhile disposition because it means that we (adults as well) can take risks and make mistakes in a safe, meaningful environment. The process of play equates well with learning processes in so far as it can act as a powerful scaffold for children's learning, enabling metacognition (learning about how to understand one's own learning and play). It allows children to cope with not knowing something long enough in order to know – they can rehearse, practise, revise, replay and re-learn: play is a non-threatening way to cope with new learning and still retain one's self-esteem and self-image (Moyles, 2005). Have you ever stopped to think why children are so much more adept at technology than adults?

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Because they are prepared to play with it over and over again and learn without fear of failure! The development in children of such positive dispositions to learning will serve them well into adult life where things are unlikely to always go smoothly and without challenges! Positive dispositions regulate how we play and learn, and should not be underestimated: 'Most problems in life cannot be solved with formulae and memorised answers ... learnt in school. They require judgement, wisdom and creative ability that come from life experiences ... embedded in play' (Gray, 2014).

Play and work

Let's get rid of another myth: play takes just as much effort as 'work' – often more. It's about perspective and the deeply embedded puritanical feeling that one can enjoy play but not work. It's known that many adults play at their work and, indeed, where work is playful, greater job satisfaction is reported. We all need to think which aspects of our work we enjoy: is it those that actually seem rather more playful?

Although it may not always feel like it, playfulness resides in us all, even if it's hard to surface at times. We know that adults play, and need to play, in similar ways to children. On the whole, however, we do it more covertly, lest we be thought of as 'childish'. But when presented with new equipment or ideas, the main way we learn about the new phenomenon and whether we can cope is to play. The more we can accept this basic principle, the more likely we are to value and accommodate children's play. As Elkind asserts, 'Play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual and social-emotional development at all ages' (2008: 4).

Play behaviours, types and patterns

The unique behaviours outlined previously make play both a process and a product and, according to Isenberg and Quisenberry (n.d.), 'these features make play both a process and a product. As a *process*, play facilitates individual understanding of skills, concepts, and dispositions; as a *product*, play provides the vehicle for children to demonstrate their understanding of skills, concepts, and dispositions.' There are also strong play links with positive emotions, such as curiosity, which generally improve motivation and facilitate learning; negative emotions (anxiety, panic, stress, for

example) generally detract from motivation (Santrock, 2003).

Others prefer 'definitions' based on functional types of play such as those outlined by many play theorists and researchers, including those elsewhere in this book. These types include: physical, language, exploratory, constructive, fantasy and social play: one can easily recognise the overlaps here as well as the tremendous potential learning in play experiences.

One observed episode of role play in the home area of a reception classroom (no need for a cameo, as readers will all have seen this type of play) showed children doing the following (examples in brackets):

- making choices (choosing equipment and who to play with)
- generating decisions (deciding on who should play which role)
- negotiating (ensuring that everyone was happy with the assigned role)
- pursuing their own interests (each child showed specific interests in different elements of the role play)
- using their own ideas and imaginations (several children contributed individual ideas, which were adopted by the group)
- showing independence in thought and action (sticking by decisions and persuading others into that frame of mind)
- exhibiting intrinsic motivation and persistence (persisting in the play for over an hour and pursuing a specific storyline)
- being physically and intellectually active in a sustained way (children did not stop thinking about the situation and moving themselves and props as relevant)
- operating from a basis of what makes sense to them (children used many experiences from home and previous role play to support their story)
- being confident and prepared for challenges (children were able to argue their viewpoint with others involved in the play)
- experimenting, exploring and investigating ideas and objects (what could be used for bathing the baby)
- setting their own goals and targets (deciding when they would go

shopping and what they would buy for dinner)

- operating in an open frame of mind in which everything is possible, and engaged in ‘what if’ situations (speculating on whether there might be a ghost in the house – it was near to Halloween)
- learning new behaviours, and practising and consolidating established ones (counting out the knives, forks, spoons, plates and dishes, and offering a running commentary on what they were doing)
- acquiring new skills and interests (developing the theme of the play over several days)
- using skills and knowledge already acquired for different purposes (fetching a book and reading it to the baby, comparing sizes of clothes for ‘baby’)
- showing themselves, in an age-appropriate way, to be socially adroit and linguistically competent (continually narrating what they were doing together and to practitioners)
- using a range of social and interpersonal skills (sharing, cooperating and turn taking)
- performing in a literate and numerate way (several examples above!)
- functioning symbolically (making one thing represent another), and
- ‘working’ hard at something they are developing themselves!

Practitioners could use this list to generate information about the value of play activities in their own settings as there is more than enough evidence of children exhibiting the kinds of powerful expressions of understanding, skills and dispositions to learning. For a majority of academics, writers and practitioners working within early years contexts there is no ‘proof’ of play’s excellence greater than their own ongoing observations and analysis of children’s play. We all know in our hearts and minds that, for all of us, especially young children, ‘Learning should be self-directed and joyful’ (Gray, 2013: 26); achieving such ideals is more difficult, but through play and playful pedagogies is certainly possible.

Play as a learning process: prove it!

While the links between play, development and learning have yet to be

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unconditionally established, those who have researched play have overwhelmingly found the benefits of play. Whether it's children's self-regulation and executive functioning, the promotion of language development and comprehension, literacy or creativity and problem solving, the growing evidence is strong (Golinkoff *et al.*, 2013).

Brain studies research (see Chapter 3) is extremely complex, but it is not difficult to establish at a simple level that the human mind is a pattern collector: young children are natural seekers of pattern and meaning. Play fosters personal meaning: when children perceive experiences as personally relevant, their neural connections proliferate, and knowledge, skills and understanding become part of long-term memory. Meaningless concepts (e.g. isolated facts) are irrelevant and are not transferred to long-term memory. Brain research also demonstrates that play is a scaffold for development, a vehicle for increasing neural structures and a means by which all children practise skills they will need later (Christie, 2001). Findings from neuroscience indicate the flexibility of mind promoted by play, including the ability to use creative, adaptable thinking (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Recent research also provides evidence that learning is something that happens through the connections made within the brain as a result of external stimuli received through the senses (see, for example, Jong *et al.*, 2009).

This neuroscientific knowledge facilitates thinking about how we unpick the early relationships between play and learning, especially through thought, problem solving and creativity. It also leads to questions about children's perceptions of formal learning contexts and how children begin to make sense of the sometimes meaningless activities presented to them.

It is clear that there is a vast difference for children between 'performance' and 'internalisation' of learning; by the former, I mean being able to 'jump through hoops' (tasks set, such as being able to recognise the sounds of letters or manipulate abstract numbers), and by 'internalisation', the ability of children to take their learning on board and make it their own. The latter requires significant understanding on the part of children, which can be gained only by first-hand, playful and meaningful experiences. The complexity of children's pretend play, for example, and the connections with early literacy, mathematical thinking and problem solving are evidenced in research (see, for example, Chapters

20 and 21). Roskos and Christie (2000) also give evidence that children's engagement in pretend play significantly and positively correlates with competencies such as text comprehension and metalinguistic awareness, and with an understanding of the purposes of reading and writing. As Howard (2009) suggests, 'Children respond positively and quickly when adults convey an acceptance of play. For example, it is known that children for whom play is a regular and fulfilling occurrence in the classroom complete teacher-directed tasks more quickly' (Howard, 2009: 156).

Each unique young child learns and develops differently, as Siegler (2005) suggests: 'Perhaps the most consistent phenomenon that has emerged in contemporary studies of children's learning is the great variability that exists within the thinking of each individual' (p.772). These differences are also related to the cultural backgrounds in which children grow and develop. All of us learn in a myriad of different ways – for example, through modelling others' behaviours and skills, observing, being physical, looking at books, talking, from the internet – and through our own efforts and creativity. In the present day, we need creative people more than ever. As Gray (2013) writes:

we don't need people to follow directions ... (we have robots for that), or to perform routine calculations (we have computers for that), or to answer already-answered questions (we have search engines for that). But we do need people who can ask and seek answers to new questions, solve new problems and anticipate obstacles before they arrive. These all require the ability to think creatively. The creative mind is a playful mind.

When children have fun learning, they want to pursue it for its own sake. This suggests that we need to consider much more playful and creative pedagogies in the early years, if we are to support children effectively now and into adulthood.

Playful pedagogies

So, what is pedagogy? In the government-funded SPEEL project (Moyles, Adams and Musgrove, 2002) colleagues and I defined pedagogy as:

... both the behaviour of teaching and being able to talk about and reflect on teaching. Pedagogy encompasses both what practitioners actually DO and THINK and the principles, theories, perceptions and challenges that inform and shape it. It connects the relatively self-contained act of teaching and being an early years educator, with personal cultural and

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community values ... curriculum structures and external influences. Pedagogy in the early years operates from a shared frame of reference ... between the practitioner, the young children and his/her family.

(p. 5)

‘Practice’ we defined as ‘all the pedagogue does within the teaching and learning context on a daily, weekly and longer term basis ... Practice includes planning, evaluating and assessing children’s play and other learning experiences both indoors and outdoors’ (Moyles *et al.*, 2002: 5).

In Stewart and Pugh (2007: 9), pedagogy is defined as ‘the understanding of how children learn and develop, and the practices through which we can enhance that process. It is rooted in values and beliefs about what we want for children, and supported by knowledge, theory and experience.’ The fundamental issue is how practitioners perceive themselves as ‘playful’ or otherwise in handling children’s play experiences and in being playful pedagogues (Moyles, 2010).

Playful pedagogies are essentially those in which the teacher or practitioner recognises different strategies for play and encourages playfulness, including interacting in playful ways with the children (Goouch, 2008) to shape curriculum content and outcomes without ‘formal’ approaches. The practitioner’s style respects, values and trusts the children’s contributions to their own learning, and allows for children’s ownership of the activities. Within a playful pedagogy the play may be co-constructed between adults and children, and the adult acts as a sensitive co-player in line with the children’s own intentions and meanings. Playful pedagogies are creative and innovative for both teaching and learning. Hirsh-Pasek *et al.* (2009) stress that traditional research on playful pedagogy points continually to better outcomes and deeper learning for young children. Elsewhere, I have identified pure play, playful learning and playful teaching (Moyles, 2010): pure play (within the total control of children); playful learning (child or adult initiated or inspired, which engages the child in playful ways of learning); playful teaching (which utilises the child’s natural and innate joy in play activities but can be directed).

Practitioner reflection on play and learning

Practitioner reflection is about having a questioning approach to personal

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and professional values and pedagogical practices, and is related to deep learning. Practitioners work within the constraints of government and institutional systems but are free to question their own actions on behalf of children. For many children, out-of-home 'schooling' can last for as much as 16 years, and all teachers have a responsibility to ensure that the time is spent as profitably and enjoyably as possible. Some of the constraints under which practitioners perceive they work (e.g. OfSTED, formalised assessments, leader issues) are very real but others can be due to confusions about play, work and learning, which we have tried to dispel in this book.

Children who are in classrooms and settings where the opportunity to play is restricted or pushed to the periphery by the emphasis on structured, academic curricula and testing, often find moments in which they can exercise their desire to play and often become 'behaviour problems' as a result (Kuschner, 2012: 103).

Reflecting on our provision for learning and teaching is a vital way in which practitioners can ensure that the years children spend institutionally can be as profitable and enjoyable an experience as possible, with full opportunities for learning through play and playful experiences. Observing and reflecting on children's competencies in their play-based learning can be an eye-opener for some of us, enabling a recognition that suitable environmental provision, and interaction and collaboration in children's play offer opportunities to assess progression, differentiation needs and the curriculum's relevance to each child.

Reflecting, too, on the inviting nature of the play and learning environment, with adults drawing attention to children's values and interests, co-constructing activities and engaging in meaningful conversations about children's thinking and feeling (Rogers, 2014), are vital to our understanding of dealing with each child's needs.

Above all, we need to reflect on the insidious belief in society at large (especially politicians) that only what is taught is what children learn. Any observation and documentation will show just how much children learn through their own play and indirect teaching and support. We must constantly ask ourselves what sense formal activities have for children and could they be more playfully and meaningfully presented. How do children perceive themselves in an educational and care context? If we don't trust children to understand themselves and others through their play,

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they begin to see themselves as inadequate and powerless, leading to dependency and greater vulnerability.

Conclusion

Kuschner (2012: 103) asks, 'Why does the life force of play survive even under such inhospitable circumstances as slavery, war, illness and rigid classroom curriculum?' Play survives because young children innately know what is necessary for their healthy development. And so do effective practitioners. The evidence is here in this book, and the reflective practitioner will use this as verification and justification for play provision.

Questions to promote reflection

- 1 Are you a playful pedagogue? Give examples from your own practice. Could anyone challenge your interpretation?
- 2 What example do you have of a practitioner's ability to provide sufficient opportunities for children to raise their own questions and voice their ideas in play contexts?
- 3 How can you create a climate of acceptance by respecting children's play choices, recognising the cultural context in which play occurs and providing many play options?
- 4 If we've lost sight of children's competence in the light of perceived external pressures, how can we redress the balance to gain the excellence of play?

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