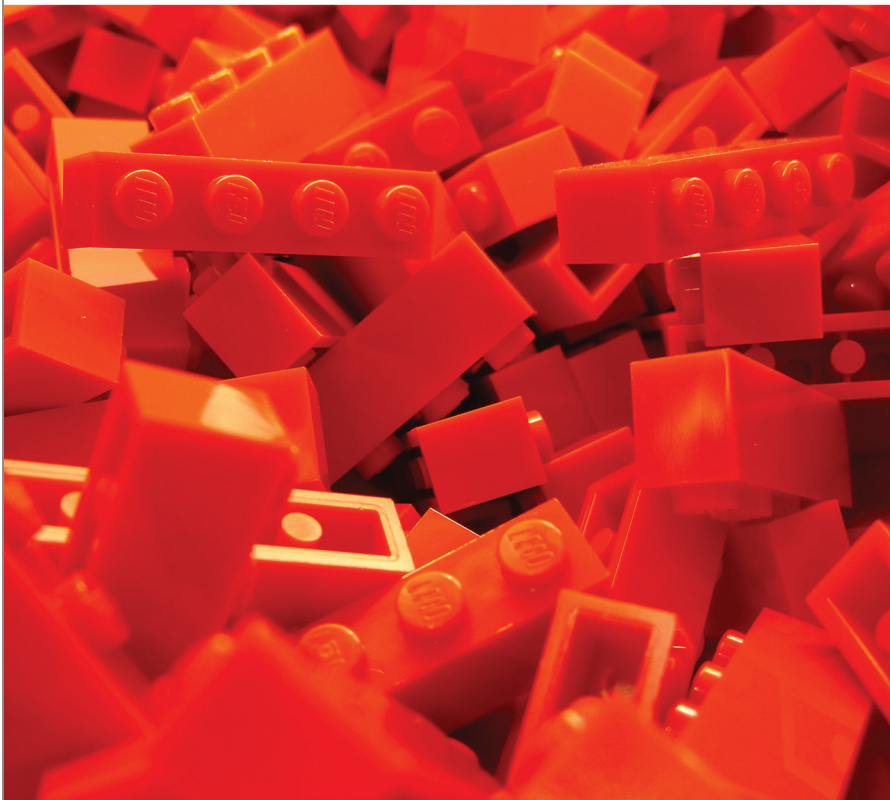


The role of play in children's learning



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Introduction

From an early age, play is important to a child's development and learning. It isn't just physical. It can involve cognitive, imaginative, creative, emotional and social aspects. It is the main way most children express their impulse to explore, experiment and understand. Children of all ages play.

(Dobson, 2004, p.8)

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in [Education, Child & Youth qualifications](#)

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- examine the place play has in the curriculum framework/guidance or documents most relevant to a personal setting
- identify various definitions of play
- demonstrate an awareness of ideas about the value of play and adults' attitudes towards play
- consider play in a personal setting and understand children's perceptions of play
- demonstrate an awareness of issues such as gender and play and children's right to play.

1 Curriculum frameworks and play

1.1 Introduction

In many countries play is widely viewed as an effective way in which children learn, and most curriculum outlines or frameworks make some reference to play. There is reason to think, however, that the concerted focus on raising educational standards throughout the UK has resulted in an increased emphasis on adult-led learning and a loss of ground for play as a child-led learning process, particularly in the middle years of childhood (7–11 years).

A further aspect highlighted by Peter Blatchford (1998) in his study of school playtimes is that many primary schools in England have reduced the amount of time that children have to themselves for spontaneous play and socialising in playgrounds. Blatchford suggests that this reduction is designed to increase the amount of teaching time in classrooms, but it also reflects an 'anti-break-time' viewpoint from adults concerned about the behaviour problems that can arise.

As well as allowing children to learn those things that adults deem important, school, and specifically playtime, provides children with important opportunities to meet and develop relationships with each other. This social dimension of school is a very important part of the hidden curriculum.

1.2 Curriculum guidance/frameworks and play

In the first activity you will explore what curriculum frameworks say about play.

Activity 1

0 hour(s) 30 minutes(s)

Aim: to clarify the extent to which the importance of play is acknowledged in curriculum documents.

Read the introduction and introductory sections to the curriculum guidance or framework that is most relevant to the setting in which you work. Are there any references to the value of play? If play is mentioned, make a note of the reasons given for the importance of play. Would you want to add anything to these reasons? If so, what would you add and why?

Does the curriculum guidance/framework provide any suggestions about the role of adults in children's play? If so, make a note of what suggestions are made. To what extent do you agree with these suggestions?

Guidance for older children may not refer specifically to play, but there might be a mention of related ideas, such as exploration, fun and enjoyment.

If no mention is made of play, or a related term is used, why do you think this is?

Answer

In completing Activity 1 you may have been surprised by your findings. You may have thought, for example, that the curriculum guidance/framework would emphasise the importance of play more than it did. Perhaps you were surprised by the emphasis on play in the introduction to the curriculum guidance/framework, since, to your knowledge, the rest of the document does not seem to value play.

As early years and primary practitioners working in settings in the UK, most of us tend to believe that play is important. The dominant discourse about young children's learning and development stresses the need for young children and babies to play. In the UK, we may define play as something that children do, while 'work' – other than school work – is something that adults do. This view is not universal. Different cultures have different views of childhood and the role of play in childhood.

In rural Bolivia, for example, three to six year olds engage in domestic, agricultural and farming work. They collect firewood, pick vegetables and feed the ducks and chickens and, in completing these tasks, they are making a valuable contribution to the family's work. As they grow older, children take on more physically arduous and responsible tasks, such as making family meals, ploughing and killing animals for eating. Children in Bolivia are, however, still able to find opportunities to play during the day (Maybin and Woodhead, 2003). This gradual involvement in the working life of adults and communities was described as 'guided participation' by Barbara Rogoff (Rogoff *et al.*, 1993).

You do not need to travel as far afield as Bolivia to come across homes and communities in which it is expected that children will both play and participate in the 'real', or adult, world. The extent to which children are protected from physical risks in different cultures and societies is diverse, depending on the environment in which they are living.

In some societies and cultures, play is an important element in the protection model of children, a model which presents 'well-cared' for children as those who are cocooned from the day-to-day life and anxieties of the adult world:

in modern Western society play has become marginalized and locked itself in a world of its own. It has grown into a highly differentiated and separate activity – an activity that separates children from the real, adult world. It has become one of the expressions for the banishment of children to the margins of society. Play has become an expression of a kind of activity that has no place in real society; something easy that children engage in while waiting for entrance into society.

(Strandell, 2000, p.147)

This particular concept of play arises from a particular view of 'the child', a view that sees children as different from adults: they are innocent in the sense that they are untouched by the cares of the adult world; they have the right to be protected; they have a degree of autonomy, but the extent to which they participate in the 'real' world is circumscribed, and lacking responsibility is almost synonymous with childhood. It is apparent, then, that attitudes towards children's play are socially, culturally and politically determined. This being the case, we need to be conscious that theories about the value of children's play will vary through time and place, and will be influenced by the dominant discourses about childhood, education and child development.

2 What is play?

2.1 Introduction

Before making judgements about the value of play, it is important to be clear about how we define 'play'. Is play unstructured exploration of the immediate environment? Does participating in a board game count as play? Does a baby's exploration of a treasure basket count as play? Are children playing when they share rude jokes in the playground? Are children playing when they act out a scene from Roman life in assembly? In the next activity you have the opportunity to identify those activities you think can best be described as play.

2.2 Play experiences within your setting

Activity 2

2 hour(s) 0 minutes(s)

Aim: to begin to clarify what play experiences children have in your setting during the course of a session.

As an experienced practitioner, you will have an idea in your mind about what sorts of activities and experiences you would classify as play. Make notes during a session, or reflect on a recent session in your setting.

1. List the activities or experiences you feel were 'play'. Try to be as specific as possible. Instead of writing 'playing with cornflour and water', or 'playing with a geography simulation on the computer', write down exactly what the children seemed to be doing: 'exploring the texture and temperature of cornflour and water', or 'making decisions about where a village could be sited on an imaginary island so that its inhabitants could thrive'.
2. List the activities that most of the children appear to enjoy, but you would not classify as 'play'.
3. List activities that you would count as 'work'.
4. Look at the lists you have made and put an asterisk by any that you thought some or all of the children did not enjoy, seemed to be stressful, or included an element of frustration.
5. Look again at your lists. Have you used the same word or combination of words frequently? One student, for example, found that the word 'explore' cropped up frequently in her notes. Another noticed that he repeatedly used the word 'active'. From looking at your lists and thinking carefully about the way you have described the activities, write a short definition of what play means to you.

2.3 Why we value play

Play is notoriously difficult to define, but this in itself is not problematic. What is important is that practitioners, parents and children within a setting share their ideas about what constitutes play and that we, as adults, are clear about why we value play. In order to do this, you need to take a step back and think about what you think play does and, from there, consider why it is valuable.

In [Activity 2](#) you thought about different play activities within your setting. The words you used may provide an indication of what you think the purpose of play is. Words and phrases such as exploration, fun, freedom, investigation, enquiry, learning, social development, coping with anxieties, making sense of the world and using up energy are some of the many descriptions and interpretations of play activities. Historically, researchers and writers have identified different functions of play, and, play has, therefore, been valued for a range of different reasons. Present-day discussions about the value of play often include ideas that have their roots in nineteenth-century society.

The purposes and reasons for valuing play have included the view that it:

- utilises surplus energy;
- is natural for children and part of the innocence of childhood;
- helps children understand the social world;
- helps children to develop cognitively;
- supports children's developing communication skills;
- helps children to cope with their feelings and fears and to manage their emotional states;
- develops positive dispositions towards challenge, change and self-initiated learning.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, links were drawn between the play of animals and children's play. This link is still made with respect to gendered aspects of play, a point we return to in [Section 4](#). According to theorists such as Spencer and Schiller, children had an excess of energy because they did not have to work. Play helped to dissipate this energy (Hyder, 2005). The notion that play is 'natural' for children has its roots in the European Enlightenment and Romantic eras and the writing of people such as Rousseau (1712–78), Pestalozzi (1747–1827) and Froebel (1782–1852).

The idea that play helps children understand the social world is still current today. Groos argued that play is a means through which children make sense of adult roles within society (Hyder, 2005). Montessori placed emphasis on children's self-initiated learning.

Piaget played a central role in the development of the view that play may be of crucial importance in children's cognitive development. Piaget's theories about learning emphasised the need for children to explore and experiment for themselves. For Piaget, play was a means by which children could develop and refine concepts before they had the ability to think in the abstract. Play was something that older children who have developed abstract thinking no longer needed. Those of you working with older children may wish to challenge Piaget's view. For Vygotsky, play was also important for an individual's cognitive development, but his view was somewhat different from that of Piaget. Where Piaget presented the child as a 'lone scientist', Vygotsky emphasised the social and cultural aspects of play. He argued that during play children were able to think in more complex ways than in their everyday lives, and could make up rules, use symbols and create narratives.

The ways in which play can support children's developing communication skills has been explored and documented by a number of researchers. Elizabeth Grugeon's research (2001), for example, draws attention to the way children in primary school playgrounds use language for a variety of purposes, including organising and structuring their games, imaginary play, and reinforcing social hierarchies. Quiet children in classrooms were sometimes shown to be very different when in a playground context.

The emphasis on the way in which play can help children explore and come to terms with their inner emotional states arises out of the work of psychoanalysts such as Freud, Isaacs, Klein and Winnicott. Play therapy arose out of the work of these and other psychoanalysts (Hyder, 2005).

Take another look at the activities you classified as 'play' in [Activity 2](#). Do you think they all fall into one category (e.g. activities concerned with cognitive development), or do they cover different aspects of play (e.g. children exploring roles, emotions, developing social skills)? Can you identify what you seem to value most about play?

2.4 Opportunities for play within your setting

Activity 3

2 hour(s) 0 minute(s)

Aim: to explore the opportunities for play within your setting.

1. Look at your planning for one day this week. Make notes on the following questions.
 1. (a) What opportunities will the children have to play?
 2. (b) What sorts of play activity have you chosen to structure?
 3. (c) What play activities have you planned for an adult to participate in?
 4. (d) What do you hope the children will gain from the various play activities?
2. Choose two or three activities to observe during the course of the day. Make notes on:
 1. (a) who participates;
 2. (b) what the children actually do;
 3. (c) what, if anything, adults do to support the play or to intervene in any other way.

At the end of each activity, note what you think the children gained from it.
3. Choose an activity that you do not categorise as play and make notes on:
 1. (a) who participates;

2.
 - (b) what the children's and adult's roles are;
3.
 - (c) the aim of the activity;
4.
 - (d) what the children actually do.

At the end of the activity, note what you think the children gained from it.

4. Look at the notes you have made in response to questions 1–3. What appears to be the differences between play and non-play activities in terms of:
 1.
 - (a) what the children do;
 2.
 - (b) what the adults do;
 3.
 - (c) who participates (e.g. patterns of participation relating to gender, or languages spoken by the children);
 4.
 - (d) what the children appear to have gained;
 5.
 - (e) how you make judgements about children's learning during play activities?

[Activity 3](#) may have raised questions about the extent to which we should be emphasising play as the prime vehicle through which young children learn. It may also have led you to begin to question the validity of the play/work divide. In Section 3 you will have the opportunity to reflect further on these issues.

3 How valuable is play?

3.1 An overview of the issues

As [Section 2.3](#) demonstrated, there has been a long tradition of valuing play in early years settings. Most definitions and descriptions of, and justifications for, play are from the adult's point of view. The dominant discourse of play in early years settings presents play as fun, enjoyable, free from externally-imposed rules, unpressurised, unlikely to lead to failure, intellectually challenging, more concerned with process than final product and 'owned' by the child, with children in control of their own learning. What else do you think could be added to this list?

A study into reception-class teachers' views about – and use of – play questions some of these widely-held assumptions about the value of play (Bennett *et al.*, 1997). The study explored the views of nine reception-class teachers about play and how they incorporated play into their practice.

One of the beliefs challenged by the study's findings was that play is a valuable learning context because the children have ownership and are interested and self-motivated. The data suggested that children were often unable to gain much from a particular play episode because the practitioners assumed the children possessed a range of complex skills, 'such as making decisions, carrying out their plans, co-operating with peers, sharing resources, problem-creating and problem-solving', and in some cases this was not the case (Bennett *et al.*, 1997, p.121). Children were also observed as being 'hands on', but not 'brains on'; they would appear to be playing in the way the teacher had hoped and expected they would, but in fact they were not intellectually engaged (Bennett *et al.*, 1997, p.121).

It is often argued that play encourages children to be independent learners, but in order to be an independent learner the child has to develop a range of strategies and skills, ranging from selecting resources, through working cooperatively with others, to reflecting on what they know and what they need to know. Again, the study suggested that play experiences do not automatically develop these abilities in children.

3.2 The role of adults in children's play

Bennett *et al.* (1997) questioned the view that exploring and discovering leads to learning. They argued that children needed adults' help to make sense of their discoveries and to make links and connections between new discoveries and their existing knowledge.

Repetitive play can also be a dilemma, in that adults are uncertain about when, or indeed whether, they should intervene to move the child on. This uncertainty is linked with a particular view of the child as a learner, and also of the role of adults in children's play. The belief that children cannot fail during play was also challenged by Bennett *et al.*'s study, as instances were observed of children being unable to pursue their goals during play because they lacked specific skills or knowledge.

Those participating in the study re-evaluated the adult's role during play. As regards role-play, the teachers held the view that this is the 'child's world' and, therefore, felt uncomfortable about intervening unless invited to do so by the children. Most teachers

intervened in other sorts of play, particularly to support children's language or skills development.

It was also evident in the Bennett *et al.* study that, on occasions, the teacher's intentions for the play activity were not well-matched or appropriate for the children. This could be either because the children had already achieved the learning intention, or because, while the play activity elicited a set of behaviours from the children, it did not seem to extend or develop their learning. Children's intentions during a play activity were sometimes at odds with those of the teacher, and this was problematic for the teachers. In one instance, children played dogs and babies, despite the fact that the teacher had set up the imaginative role-play area to encourage and facilitate play around the theme of birthday parties. In another setting, children played burglars and guard dogs in the class 'shop' (Bennett *et al.*, 1997, p.73).

Bennett *et al.*'s research does not suggest that play is not valuable, nor that early years settings should introduce formal teaching. It does, however, encourage practitioners to look more closely at the actual play experiences of children, and acts as a catalyst for developing our thinking about how we should be planning for play, and about the role of adults in children's play. The next activity looks at attitudes towards play within your setting.

Activity 4

1 hour(s) 0 minutes(s)

Aim: to clarify your views about the adult's role in children's play.

In Bennett *et al.*'s study (1997) it appears that the teachers involved were, to some extent, influenced by Piagetian theories about child development. They had a positive view of children's capabilities, but sometimes their expectations were too high (e.g. assuming the four-year olds they worked with had the ability to manage their own learning, or to cooperate effectively within a group).

For this activity you need to describe your current position with regard to play. To do this, you will need to reflect and make notes on:

- your views about the value of play (have they changed in any way since you completed [Activity 2](#) and [Activity 3](#)?);
- your views about the role of adults in children's play;
- difficulties you have experienced in your setting with regard to play activities (e.g. children and adults having different, or even conflicting, purposes and intentions);
- changes you have made in your views about 'the child' and the value and purposes of play in order to help you better support and facilitate children's learning through play.

Write a description of how you approach play in your setting. Highlight what you think the adult's role is and try to relate this to specific theories of childhood, play and learning.

3.3 Different types of play

When thinking about play in early years and primary settings, it is sometimes helpful to try to make a distinction between different types of play experience: not in terms of listing role-play, small world play, and so on, but rather in terms of the balance of child and adult input and initiation. Free play is generally understood to be those play experiences that children choose for themselves and that involve minimal adult intervention. The term 'free play' is a bit of a misnomer, however, as no play is totally free. All play experiences are structured to a greater or lesser extent by the resources available, the people involved and the context.

Structured, or guided, play refers to play experiences in which the adult has more of an input, either in initiating the play, controlling the resources available, or intervening or participating during the course of play. Usually practitioners will have a fairly clear idea about the aim of the structured play, and may have specific learning intentions in mind, which will influence the nature of the practitioner's intervention. Bruce (1999) is anxious about adult involvement in children's play, arguing that children's play can be dangerously damaged by adult intervention. She is unwilling to describe guided play, structured play or purposeful play as 'play' on the grounds that she believes that adult-led 'play' does not take adequate account of the children's interests and concerns. Do you agree with Bruce's views?

Practitioners who adopt a social-constructivist approach may feel uncomfortable with free play on the grounds that it can be socially isolated and does not necessarily involve children or adults in constructing and sharing meanings. Influenced by the work of Vygotsky and Bruner, these practitioners may find it easier to envisage adult involvement during children's play. They may argue that discussion, reflection and 'loaning' knowledge or expertise can enrich children's play experiences and play a key role in children's learning.



If they are to avoid taking ownership of children's play and reducing the children's choices and autonomy, adults need to intervene sensitively. Such intervention does not mean that the play becomes 'adult-led', but rather that the adult is sensitive to the child's needs and

interests. If the practitioner is intervening in order to extend the child's learning, they need to be sensitive to what the child is trying to achieve and what the child's concerns are, in addition to identifying ways in which to best support the child. Strandell's work is relevant here, as she draws attention to the need to try to understand play from the children's perspective.

3.4 What play means to children

So far in this section we have been exploring whether or not play is valuable and worthwhile, but in doing so we have been operating within an educational framework and thinking about ways in which play may, or may not, support young children's learning and development. Strandell argues that practitioners tend to:

put phenomena and children into fixed categories of meaning: to know what a child is and what he or she needs, to know what is good and what is bad and to offer explanations for why things are as they are.

(Strandell, 2000, p.153)

While this may be natural, in that the practitioners are observing children playing and trying to make sense of what they see, it is possible to suggest that practitioners need to talk to the children to develop a better understanding of how and why children play. Strandell provides an example of three children, Marko, a six-year-old boy, Jussi, a four-year-old boy, and Mari, a three-year-old girl, playing in a day-care centre in Finland.

The play episode starts with the two boys romping on a large mattress, they then find a soft toy which Marko pushes under his sweater and then says he is going to show Hanna (a child in another room). The two boys go into the other room, show Hanna Marko's large stomach and then return to the big room where they jump off a bench onto a mattress and swing on a swing. Jussi then announces 'I don't want to play with you anymore. I'm going to be with Aki' and he leaves the room. Marko calls out 'No, stay with me, you can ...' and with that runs out of the room. The two boys return and Marko suggests they close the door. They then hear a buzzing sound in the entrance hall and Jussi runs out to investigate. At this point Mari enters the room. Jussi says 'Don't come in here' and she collects a piece of cloth and leaves.

The boys then decide they should clean up the room and discuss what each child will do. They tidy up the room and leave.

(Strandell, 2000, pp.153–4)

Strandell suggested that what she observed would be described as 'bad quality' play by the day-care staff. The play was not 'good' in that the children did not settle to anything, they were frequently distracted by other things, and it was not obvious what they were learning. Strandell argued, however, that the boys were curious about their environment (e.g. investigating the buzzing sound), they were able to focus on what other people were doing and they were absorbing what was going on around them. For these boys, maybe their play had no purpose other than the very important one of acting as social beings and 'getting informed and chatting ... as part of upholding social relationships and participation in everyday life' (Strandell, 2000, p.155). In other words, children's play may not always

be about preparing them for social life, it may be the means by which children actually participate in social life and negotiate relationships.

In order to develop a more complete picture of what children think about play we need to become more aware of what play means to children. The following activity is aimed at enabling you to try to gain the children's perspective on play.

Activity 5

2 hour(s) 0 minutes(s)

Aim: to develop your understanding of how children view play and children's and adult's perceptions of play.

You will need to choose one or two children in your setting, perhaps a girl and a boy, to explore their views on play. To find the answers to the following, and other, questions, you may find that you are using tools from the Mosaic approach, such as child conferencing or taking photographs. Although this is not a researching practice activity, you will see how tools from the Mosaic approach can be used as part of everyday practice. Think carefully about the questions you ask.

If you are working with very young babies, you may need to talk to significant adults. Again, think carefully about questions to ask, and where and when you intend to interview the adults.

Questions to explore could include:

- When can you play in the setting?
- Who do you play with?
- What do you play?
- Where do you play?
- Why do you play?
- Do adults play with you?
- Do you think that adults think that playing is important?
- Do you learn anything from playing?

Finding out what children think about the learning experiences and activities we offer them, including play, is an important aspect of listening to children. This may lead us to question assumptions and beliefs that we have about the value of play and whether children feel that their play experiences are meaningful and worthwhile. In the next section we explore some of the issues you need to consider in reflecting on the play experiences you offer to children.

4 Dilemmas and questions

4.1 The international perspective

Earlier in this course ([Section 1](#)) you looked briefly at cross-cultural approaches towards children's play and children's work. In many societies throughout the world it is expected that children, even very young children, will help with the family's work or contribute to the family income. In some societies the separation between the world of the child and the world of the adult is not as stark as in others. This could make us question the validity of the assertion that all children have a right to play. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), however, all children have a right to play. Article 31 states:

1. States Parties [governments and state agencies] recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

(Child Rights Information Network, 1990)

It is possible to argue that the image of the child and childhood underpinning the UNCRC is that of the white European or North American child (James *et al.*, 1998, p.141), but many countries seem to acknowledge the importance of play. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) simultaneously acknowledges children's right to play and to be protected from economic exploitation and child labour while emphasising children's right to have responsibilities towards their families and society. What seems to be at issue is not children's right to play, but the role that play has in a child's life and the extent to which children are expected not to work (except in school).

Adult views about the value of play vary between cultures. Hyder (2005) refers to the work of Hyun (1998) to highlight how parents from European and North American backgrounds tend to focus on the importance of play for individual cognitive development. They also tend to relate this to objects or toys. This would seem to be reflected in the advertisements on television for babies' toys, which tend to show one child playing with a toy, with the voice-over stressing the various ways in which the toy can help support the baby's cognitive development. There is a huge market for 'educational' toys in the UK, with companies such as Mothercare emphasising that parents can choose the 'ideal' gift for their child, 'whether it's developmental toys for babies, pre-school educational toys or that all-important first bike' (Mothercare, 2006). According to Hyun's research, parents from other backgrounds tend to place more emphasis on the social and emotional aspects of play (Hyder, 2005, p.21).

It would appear that play is a universal feature of most children's lives, provided the children's lives have not been disrupted by events such as war, conflict or famine. This is not to say that children's play is identical throughout the world. While children in different

parts of the world may use similar objects in similar ways, and all children appear to engage in 'pretend play', who children play with, the extent to which adults are invited to participate in children's play, and the children's choice of play themes vary. Hyder argues that:

all children in all societies appear to engage in activities that would fulfil some of the criteria of play ... That is, children explore and pretend as a way of engaging with the world. More importantly, play everywhere is an 'enculturing' process – that is, a means through which children learn about their cultures.

(Hyder, 2005, p.21)

This consideration of children's choice of play themes and the issue of 'enculturation' moves us on to considering issues of equity and play.

4.2 Equity issues

The research findings of Farver and Shin (1987) suggested that there are discernible differences between Korean-American and Anglo-American children's pretend play themes. Korean-American play themes seemed to involve minimal social conflict, while Anglo-American children's play themes seemed to involve an emphasis on the individual and could include a degree of aggression. Farver and Shin suggested that these differences were traceable to the different cultural values the children were experiencing. How, if at all, do you think that the play of children in your setting reflects the cultural values they are being introduced to?

In many early years settings there is still a clear distinction between girls' and boys' play. When young children are asked about who they play with, it is not uncommon to hear comments such as four-year-old Emma's: 'Nah, I don't play with any boys ... I play with girls' (Browne, 2004, p.66). Not only did girls and boys claim not to play with each other, but they were also very clear about the different things that girls and boys like to play with. A four-year-old boy explained that he did not play with girls because, 'I'm not their friend ... They don't like playing Power Rangers. I play Superman, Power Rangers and Batman and that's why I don't want to play with them' (Browne, 2004, p.67).

It is possible to argue that the children's choice of playmates and activities has a biological basis, but research on this is inconclusive. These play patterns could also be explained if children are viewed as absorbing social messages about what is 'acceptable' or 'appropriate' for girls and boys to engage in, but this argument is weakened if we view children as co-constructors of meaning (i.e. it is not one-way traffic). Furthermore, practitioners' best efforts at introducing strategies aimed at involving children in less gender-stereotyped activities are often unsuccessful.

An alternative approach to looking at children's gender-based play patterns involves considering how young children come to understand what it means to be a girl or a boy in the society and culture in which they growing up. This is part of the 'enculturing process' referred to by Hyder (2005). Enculturing does not involve children in the uncritical adoption of the behaviour patterns or the beliefs of the society. Rather it involves children in actively trying to make sense of what they experience.

Children develop their identities through their interaction with others and, in the case of gender, through access to the dominant gender discourse. The dominant gender discourse positions girls (and femininity) and boys (and masculinity) as opposite and separate. Children work hard to position themselves unambiguously as female or male

partly because society emphasises the two gender categories. Practitioners can help children explore new roles and different ways of positioning themselves, but providing a range of dressing-up clothes and non-sexist pictures is not enough. Adults may need to intervene in children's imaginative role-play to help children develop alternative solutions to problems and to explore different ways of being a girl or a boy: for example, girls can be powerful and assertive and boys can be caring.

4.3 Do children need to play?

Although we have considered the purposes of play and the extent to which it is valued in various societies, we have not considered how necessary play is for children's learning, development and well-being. There is reason to think that children who have their play behaviour severely restricted, or who find it difficult to play, can become very unhappy, or worse. In a study of 26 young male murderers, Brown (1998) reported that normal play behaviour was virtually absent throughout the lives of these highly violent, antisocial men. It is interesting to note that discussions about the approach to early years provision in Reggio Emilia pre-schools rarely mention play. According to Katz (1998) there are plenty of opportunities for spontaneous play with blocks, dressing-up clothes, painting, collage and clay, as well as dramatic play. In Reggio Emilia settings, where the practitioners' approach has been heavily influenced by the theories of Vygotsky, there is a balance between play and the more structured project work.

For Reggio Emilians play is highly valued for its ability to promote development, but no more so than the complex and long-term projects in which children and teachers become engaged.

(New, 1998, p.274)

Practitioners in Reggio Emilia are unapologetic about the use of projects in children's learning as they firmly believe that 'children are able to listen to others, have respect for others [which] predisposes them to encountering and learning from others' (author's personal notes on Cagliari, 2003a). Would you agree with this view?

4.4 Observing play

Observing children's play offers an important way in which adults can monitor and assess children's progress.

Logging children's use of a particular activity or play scenario helps practitioners monitor how children use their time, their particular interests and any gaps in their experiences, so that practitioners can plan a balanced curriculum that takes note of children's strengths, interests and needs.

(QCA/DfEE, 2000a, p.24)

Playtime in a primary school offers a context where children's free play can be observed. Janet May, a teaching assistant from Yelvertoft Primary School, Northampton, describes how she draws on playground observations to inform classroom thinking.

I love being around the children. It's very interesting for me to see them as a teaching assistant in the classroom, and then as a playtime supervisor outside.

I can very often take back a lot of things to the teacher that have happened at playtime. Or maybe something I've seen in a child's character outside that I'm able to discuss with the teacher; and that might explain what's happening in class. So it's quite valuable to be in both situations.

(Personal communication, May 2006)

Because of their emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge, practitioners in Reggio Emilia adopt a somewhat different approach to observation. According to Cagliari, observing children in 'unstructured' or play activities may reveal what a child has already learnt. She suggests that in order to be able to plan future activities the adult needs to be a participant observer: taking part in the activity, listening to and discussing the children's ideas and engaging in self-observation in order to identify possible future paths of learning (author's personal notes on Cagliari, 2003a).

Hyder (2005) argues that children can reveal a great deal through their fantasy and imaginative play, and that listening and watching is a crucial part of gaining access to children's ideas and feelings. Cagliari (2003a), however, warns about the dangers of seeing what we want to see. Children's play is complex, and we need to be cautious about assuming that, because we have observed the observable (i.e. what the children are doing or saying), we have accessed their thoughts and ideas. We need to be careful that we see what actually happens and not what we expect or want to see. There are always different ways of interpreting situations; these may not be 'correct' from a scientific point of view, but if we are not open to what we didn't expect, if we are not open to different ways in which a topic can be approached, the different connections it is possible to make, the different premises, then it becomes difficult to discover the knowledge-building processes of the children. It is important not to over-predict what will happen.

Conclusion

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