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New directions in play: consensus or collision?

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The aims of this article are to explore contemporary challenges to developing play in early childhood settings, and to identify areas of consensus and collision in policy and practice. Contemporary research highlights the effectiveness of mixed pedagogical approaches, including child- and adult-initiated play. Whilst early childhood specialists recognise these approaches as central to high-quality curricula in early childhood settings, play continues to pose a number of challenges to teachers and practitioners. These issues are discussed in the context of contemporary theoretical trends towards developing critical pedagogies, which contest the power effects of free play and free choice in the context of wider concerns about equity and social justice.

Introduction

Play has long been valued within early childhood communities of research and practice, and is increasingly recognised as integral to lifelong learning and well-being (Wood & Attfield, 2005). The field of play scholarship continues to thrive and expand both nationally and internationally, and includes the relatively new discipline of ludology, which is the academic study of games and gaming activities across the lifespan. The commitment to play in early childhood education is now informed by empirical research rather than seductive ideology, with new methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks providing some interesting challenges to established assumptions about the role and value of play (Wood, 2007a, b). Although it has taken a long time for policy makers to catch up with these trends, play is now validated in policy texts and strategies, and is regarded as integral to high-quality provision and practice (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). In addition, more attention is being paid to sustaining play beyond early childhood, as evidenced in the Play Policy launched in 2007 by the National Union of Teachers, which spans birth to 18 (NUT, 2007), and the development of play work through national organisations such as Play England and Play Wales.

In early childhood education, the Foundation Stage in England provides a curriculum framework from birth to five, and proposes deeper engagement with

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teaching and learning through play, both indoors and outdoors (QCA/DfEE, 2000; DfES, 2005, 2007). This commitment is paralleled in Wales by the Foundation Phase, which promotes a 'play-based curriculum' from age three to seven. Whilst the early childhood community has broadly welcomed these policy shifts, they also pose a number of challenges to teachers and practitioners. These developments also need to be seen against contemporary theoretical trends towards developing critical pedagogies, which contest the power effects of free play and free choice in the context of wider concerns about equity and social justice (MacNaughton, 2000; Yelland, 2005). At the same time, there are ongoing reservations about the instrumental uses of play to achieve defined learning outcomes within increasingly regulated curriculum and assessment frameworks and policy-driven 'effectiveness' agendas (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Wood, 2007a).

The aims of this article are to explore contemporary challenges to developing play in early childhood settings, and to identify areas of consensus and collision. The first section examines current directions in research and early childhood policy frameworks, with consideration of the current effectiveness agenda. This is followed by critical discussion of two key themes: play, diversity and social justice, and adults' roles in play. It is argued here that teachers and practitioners need to respond creatively to policy frameworks by developing integrated curriculum and pedagogical approaches that value child- and adult-initiated activities, whilst extending their knowledge and understanding of the diverse ways in which children use play provision.

Research on play

Play has been studied from many different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, including biology, psychology, anthropology, education and cultural studies. In the fields of psychology and education, research has provided substantial evidence to support the role of play in communication, language and literacy learning; emotional and social development, including social competence and peer group affiliation; spatial and mathematical learning; creativity; the development of positive learning dispositions and orientations, and the formation of identity (Broadhead, 2004; Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2005; Johnson *et al.*, 2005; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Emerging evidence on the neuro-physiological development of the brain also indicates the importance of children making connections between areas of learning and experience through play, exploration and experimentation, and through collaborative, reciprocal relationships (Gopnik *et al.*, 1999). New forms of play are being created by popular culture and new media technologies, which offer extended affordances for interactivity, meaning-making and representation (Marsh, 2005; Yelland, 2007). Whilst play is typically valued in early childhood, there is a broad consensus that play and playfulness are sustained in many different forms across the lifespan from highly structured activities such as chess and Olympic sports, to more informal activities such as carnivals, festivals, beauty pageants and drinking games (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Being playful means engaging in typical play activities, as well as being in a

playful state of mind where the spirit or essence of play is injected into other actions (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Thus in contemporary play scholarship, play is regarded as essential to lifelong learning, creativity and well-being.

Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that although play is seldom the only determinant of any of the important forms of learning that occur in children, play in childhood is nevertheless progressive, and may facilitate transfer of knowledge and skills between different contexts. Children's play development moves along paths of increasing social, physical and cognitive complexity, which involves using signs and symbols; sustaining episodes of imaginative play; creating rules, roles and play scenarios; and controlling behaviour and actions. Play typically becomes more organised and industrious, more rule-bound, and focused on ends as well as means. These progressive processes can be seen in role-play activities, where children step in and out of play mode to organise props, and direct actions, dialogue and events. As children become skilled players, their play also becomes more sustained and more complex, with increased attention to structures, processes, intentional activities and outcomes (Broadhead, 2004). In play, children often display the positive attributes and dispositions that are considered essential to successful learning, such as planning and organisation, concentration, engagement, reflection, involvement and participation. However, in school contexts, it is often the case that opportunities for play are reduced just as children are becoming master players. Thus it can be argued that constraining opportunities for play beyond childhood may deny its positive benefits, particularly in sustaining positive dispositions to learning.

In terms of curriculum and pedagogy, play has always sat uneasily between the informal approaches that are typical in pre-school settings, and the more formal demands that are made in compulsory schooling, a phenomenon that is shared across diverse international contexts (Wood, 2007a). Play may be confined to brief periods of 'choosing time', or as a reward for work, or may even be withheld as a punishment for poor behaviour or work. Even where play is valued, research evidence indicates that practitioners do not always know how to plan for play, or understand how to support and interpret children's learning in play activities (Bennett *et al.*, 1997; Moyles *et al.*, 2002). In order to address these problems, contemporary play scholars support a bi-directional relationship between play and the curriculum (Johnson *et al.*, 2005; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Curriculum-generated play experiences can be planned intentionally to help children learn specific skills and concepts, and play-generated curriculum activities can emerge from children's spontaneous interests and activities (Van Hoorn *et al.*, 2002). Examples of curriculum-generated play would include resourcing role play to promote specific areas of learning such as communication, language and literacy, or developing the outdoor environment to promote scientific and geographical learning. Play-generated curriculum experiences arise from children's interests and self-initiated activities, with practitioners providing resources to extend and enrich their learning. Wood and Attfield (2005) argue for a continuum between work and play, which acknowledges the importance of playful approaches to teaching and learning, and enables practitioners and children to work together on 'high-interest' areas or themes.

In spite of these positive endorsements, it is important not to romanticise the power and potential of play. Some contemporary writers contest the constructs of *play-based* learning and *play-based* curriculum, for a number of reasons (Wood, 2007b). First, play is not the only means of learning in early childhood, and, in some contexts, is not the best or most efficient way of learning. Second, children do not always choose activities that can be classified as play: they may choose activities such as reading, writing, practising skills, and computer-based activities, which may retain elements of playfulness, or may be more like work. Third, practitioners sometimes make assumptions about the ability of young learners to benefit from free choice, and to express their needs and interests through play activities. The idea that curriculum content arises through needs and interests may be ideologically seductive but remains problematic in practice. For example, showing an interest is not the same as making meaningful connections between areas of learning and experience. In addition, children are drawn to activities that involve interested and interesting adults, whether those activities are highly structured or open-ended. Fourth, some forms of play, particularly role play, involve quite complex skills and processes which may not be easily understood by all children. Therefore some children may be excluded from the full range of play provision on the basis of their cultural heritage and home practices (Brooker, 2002) by their gender (Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000) or their individual differences (such as special educational needs) (Johnson *et al.*, 2005).

In light of these contrasting perspectives, play remains a complex and problematic field for researchers and practitioners. The endorsement for play in contemporary policy contexts has foregrounded the pragmatic need to identify what constitutes good-quality play, and to demonstrate its effectiveness in terms of children's educational progress and achievement. As the following section reveals, whilst policy recommendations provide some consensus for developing integrated curriculum and pedagogical approaches, they also reify instrumental views of play, which creates some collision with established ideologies about children's freedom, choice and autonomy.

Policy contexts in early childhood education

The last 10 years have witnessed unprecedented levels of policy intervention in early childhood education and care, both nationally and internationally. From being at the margins of government policies, provision for young children is now situated within wider social policy frameworks (such as health, social care, law, workforce development), with clear recognition of the significance of high-quality provision for children's subsequent development and achievements (Sylva & Pugh, 2005). The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England, first introduced in 2000, has been revised to include birth to five, and aims to improve coherence and continuity across settings, and with Key Stage 1 of the National Curriculum (DfES, 2007). In Wales, the Foundation Phase (age three to seven) is currently in the pilot stage, with full roll-out planned for all settings from 2008. Without the pressures of national testing at age

seven, practitioners in Wales potentially have the freedom to develop the integrated approaches that are advocated in contemporary play research.

These policy developments are informed by the DfES-funded study on Effective Provision for Preschool Education (EPPE). This large-scale, mixed-method, longitudinal study is tracking the progress and development of 3000 children who have attended different types of pre-school provision into primary and secondary education (Sylva *et al.*, 1999). Using an educational effectiveness design, the research has identified the impact of a range of child, parent, home, pre-school and school influences on children's attainment, and social behavioural outcomes. The results of the quantitative analyses of effective pre-school settings were used to select a small number of case studies for more detailed qualitative investigations of practice. Outcomes from EPPE, and the related study on Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002), have identified a range of pedagogical strategies and techniques that affect child outcomes, and have endorsed mixed pedagogical approaches, which incorporate both child- and adult-initiated activities, including play. Some of the findings, which are summarised below, situate play within effective pedagogical approaches:

- Effective pedagogues model appropriate language, values and practice, encourage socio-dramatic play, praise, encourage, ask questions and interact verbally with children.
- Effective pedagogy is both 'teaching' and the provision of instructive learning and play environments and routines.
- The most effective settings provide both teacher-initiated group work and freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities.
- Excellent settings tend to achieve an equal balance between adult-led and child-initiated interactions, play and activities.
- The most highly qualified staff provide the most direct teaching alongside the kind of interactions which guide but do not dominate children's thinking.
- Teachers stimulate children's activity and talk through 'sustained shared thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002).

Sustained shared thinking occurs in adult- and child-initiated activities (including play), when adults and children engage in meaningful discussions that involve co-constructing meaning and understanding (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Practitioners respond to and stimulate children's interests, ideas and areas of enquiry, and promote shared orchestration of cognitive and social activity. These findings do not propose that play-based learning activities are more appropriate than those that involve teacher direction and direct instruction. Rather it is the mix of activities that contributes to pedagogical effectiveness and child outcomes. The role of teachers and practitioners includes:

- planning and resourcing challenging learning environments;
- supporting children's learning through planned play activity;

- extending and supporting children's spontaneous play;
- extending and developing children's language and communication in play;
- assessing children's learning through play;
- ensuring continuity and progression;
- combining adult-directed and child-initiated activities;
- emphasising well-planned, purposeful play (both indoors and outdoors);
- planning for continuity between play and work;
- allowing time for children to become engrossed, and work in depth;
- engagement between children and adults.

These findings stand as a counterpoint, and challenge to the ideological commitment to free play and free choice, and to a non-interventionist role in play for teachers and practitioners. Within integrated approaches, the role of adults is conceptualised as pro-active and responsive to individuals and groups. These recommendations are more sophisticated and more demanding in terms of professional knowledge and expertise than either a laissez-faire approach, or the direct instructional strategies that are reified in national strategies for literacy and numeracy.

The EPPE recommendations can be interpreted as providing positive validations for play. However a note of caution must be inserted: it is essential that recommendations from government-funded studies, especially those situated within an 'effectiveness' remit, are subjected to critical scrutiny in light of wider research in early childhood. Whilst play is not elevated as the principal way of learning, the notion of 'potentially instructive play activities' and 'well-planned, purposeful play' may limit play to achieving defined learning outcomes. Again this recommendation presents potential collision courses with contrasting theories and research findings. Some research studies have claimed that the focus on content knowledge has led to an erosion of practical first-hand experiences, play-based activities, free choice, spontaneity and independence in children's learning (Moyle *et al.*, 2002). Critical theorists also propose that educational play disrupts children's choices and autonomy, and reinforces differential power relations between teachers and children (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005). Knowledge about effective practices is not in itself a sufficient basis for decisions about professional actions. Decisions about what is educationally desirable require value judgements that may be situated in local cultures and contexts. As the following discussion proposes, concerns with equity and social justice are also integral to value-based decision-making.

Play, diversity, and social justice

Using the lenses of feminist post-structural theory, and critical theory, contemporary researchers are challenging established assumptions about the universal efficacy of play, and the ideological commitment to free play and free choice. It is argued that such approaches can militate against equality of opportunity and equal access to curriculum provision because some children's choices, needs and interests are privileged over others (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; MacNaughton, 2000; Yelland,

2005). Therefore, encouraging children to make choices about what and who to play with, how and where to play, presents a number of challenges for individuals, for groups of children, and for the adults in the setting. Furthermore, early childhood education is still influenced predominantly by Euro-American middle-class cultures and beliefs, and by highly individualised views of learning and development, which may constrain the critical examination of play from different perspectives.

In the context of cultural diversity, Brooker (2002) has shown that free choice and play-based approaches do not benefit all children, especially where these are not consistent with culturally situated child-rearing practices in homes and communities. Brooker studied 16 children in their transition from home to a Reception class in a primary school. Half the children came from Anglo families, whose parents were born and educated in the UK, and whose home culture was English working class. Three children were of dual Anglo and Afro-Caribbean heritage. The other half were from Bangladeshi homes, with 'first generation' parents, whose home and work lives were almost entirely within the neighbourhood Bangladeshi community. In the Bangladeshi homes, children were prepared for a formal, transmissive style of education, in which they were required to be passive, and to obey the guidance of the teacher. These children, and their families, found it difficult to accommodate to the teachers' child-centred orientations. The pedagogical routines and expectations included free play, choice, independence and autonomy, all of which were unfamiliar for the children, and put them at a disadvantage in relation to their Anglo peers. For example, Brooker documents how Khiernessa established her agency by resisting play and free choice:

... she refused to play with the sand or water (she reported that her mother said 'No, you get cold, you get cough'); she rejected all forms of role play, except the domestic (flatly refusing to play in the 'shoe shop'); and she avoided construction toys ('No, they boys'), the computer and all the structured table-top activities intended for shape and space, matching, memory, visual discrimination and so on. Despite her bright start to school, she did not conform entirely to the 'ideal-type' pupil, nor was she accessing the whole curriculum. In exercising her own agency, she was in these terms restricting her own learning. (Brooker, 2002, p. 92)

Brooker's findings demonstrate that within culturally diverse communities, practitioners need to challenge their assumptions about the universal efficacy of play, and develop informed awareness about children's varied cultural ways of exercising choice and engaging in play.

Focusing on gender equity, Ryan (2005) uses feminist post-structural theories to contest the commitment to free choice, because of the diverse ways in which children learn to make and enact their choices. Ryan observed the free choice and play activities of children in an urban kindergarten classroom in the USA over a five-month period. Whilst the children did exercise power, authority and agency in their social worlds, the kinds of play in which they engaged perpetuated stereotypical gender differences, and provided different opportunities for boys and girls. Similar findings are presented by Wood and Cook (2006), who argue that dominant

discourses of individual development are inherently problematic in terms of gendered choices and behaviours in play. In a small-scale study of four children (two boys and two girls) in an English Reception class, observations of children's role-play activities revealed that they used the same areas in different ways. The girls tended towards domestic role-play activities, which often included subduing the disruptive play of the boys. In contrast, the two boys chose superhero roles, which included killing sharks and wild animals, rescuing their friends, and resisting adults' surveillance and control of their activities. The adults rarely intervened in the girls' quiet, domestic play, despite their stereotypical and limiting choices. However, they did intervene in the boys' boisterous play, even though their play episodes involved high levels of imaginative language and symbolic interaction.

These studies reveal some of the dilemmas that teachers and practitioners face in their play provision, and the ways in which they are caught between contrasting perspectives. On the one hand, critical theorists argue that educational play disrupts children's choices and autonomy, and reinforces differential power relations. Sutton-Smith (1997) has also argued that the emphasis on educational play has tended to obscure the ways in which children use play for their own affairs of power, how they construct personal and shared meaning, and how they establish multiple roles and identities. For example, adults exercise value judgements by approving certain types of play, and banning others. Noisy, boisterous rough and tumble play, and play with weapons are not easily accommodated within pre-school and school settings, both in terms of adults' beliefs and value-positions, and the physical space available (Holland, 2003). On the other hand, children's free choices have their own power effects. For example, dominant children may include or exclude others, or dominant groups may colonise activities and spaces. In performing stereotypical gender roles and activities, girls and boys may limit their own, and each other's choices. Ryan (2005) argues for change in how early childhood educators think about free choice: instead of choice being conceptualised as freedom from adult authority, adults' interactions should focus on helping children to understand the choices offered by different classroom discourses and the power effects of such choices. Children also need to understand the range of choices that are possible in terms of how they construct their identity, and to have the freedom to position themselves in multiple ways (MacNaughton, 2004; Blaise, 2005). As Ryan (2005) argues, children's play is not a neutral space but rather a political and negotiated terrain, in which children map out multiple discourses, identities and power dynamics. Therefore, using critical theories to understand play from children's perspectives also has implications for adults' roles in play, and for developing integrated pedagogical approaches.

Adults' roles in play

Although there are multiple directions in play research and education policies, a common theme is that early childhood educators need to re-conceptualise their roles in play, and their provision for play. The validation of integrated approaches provokes a number of challenges in terms of curriculum design, pedagogies and assessment

practices. Similarly, perspectives from critical theorists pose fundamental challenges to institutional cultures, routines and rules in relation to equitable practices. In relation to current policy discourses of standards, effectiveness and performativity, learning through play remains vulnerable because it is not always predictable. Rather than leading to 'intended learning outcomes', or being 'planned and purposeful', play activities often flow in unplanned directions, and lead to unintended outcomes. So can these contemporary perspectives be synthesised? And, if so, what are the potential areas of collision and consensus?

There is broad consensus in current research and play scholarship regarding the value of integrated approaches, with child-and adult-initiated activities ranging across a continuum of play, playfulness and work (Wood, 2007a). However, the emphasis is on the concept of *integration*, with practitioners moving flexibly across this continuum, and develop the bi-directional relationship between play and curriculum, as discussed previously. In other words, it is not sufficient to merely *mix* pedagogical approaches, with play remaining in the margins of free choice/reward time, and adult-directed activities taking precedence. As Figure 1 shows, adults create the overall pedagogical and curriculum framework within which flexible approaches can be developed. Adults plan intentional activities which are classified as work, because the learning outcomes are pre-defined, and children have few choices about what they do, and how. Related activities may also have a playful orientation, such as using number stories and rhymes (mathematics), exploring characters and plots in favourite stories (communication, language and literacy), and making props and resources for role-play areas (design technology). Adults can also respond to children's play choices and activities, for example by extending their interests through stories, information and communication technologies, visitors to school, and out of school activities. Children can choose activities as individuals or as groups, from the range of provision on offer. Some of those choices will be classified as 'pure play', because they involve the following characteristics: intrinsic motivation, positive mood and emotional states, imagination and pretence (non-literality), symbolic activity and representations, dependence on internal rules, attention to processes (means) rather than outcomes (ends), and internal control and autonomy. Some of those choices may also be classified as 'work', particularly where older children choose to pursue their interests in specific areas of learning. Children are capable of developing planned and purposeful play, especially as their play skills and knowledge develop. Therefore, within integrated approaches, they should be able to plan and develop activities, and have sustained periods of time to play and work in depth.

The concept of integrated pedagogical approaches potentially creates a new form of pedagogical praxis, which requires teachers and practitioners to attend closely to the choices that children make; the range of play activities in which they engage; their skills, dispositions and competences as players and learners, and the impact of their choices and activities for the whole community. Wood (2007a) argues that children's needs, interests and play activities do not constitute a sufficient basis for curriculum planning and organisation. Such a statement may be regarded as a collision with traditional ideologies and play practices. However, revealing personal needs and

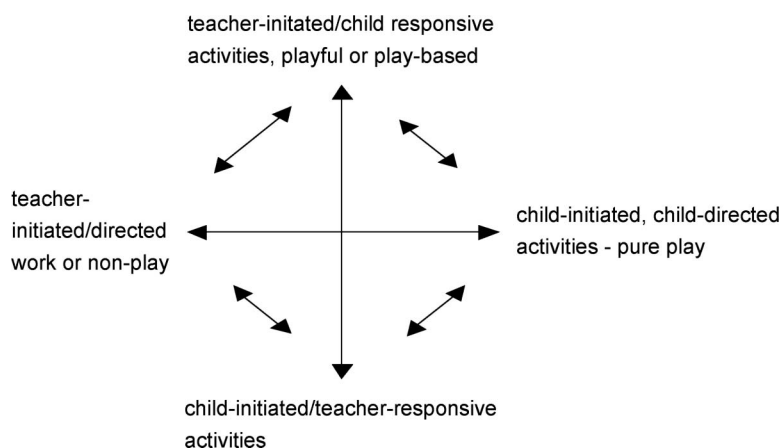


Figure 1. Integrated curriculum and pedagogical approaches

interests is not the same as creating a problem, enquiry or activity space. Needs and interests may be fleeting or sustained, trivial or purposeful. They may be shared with others in the community, or may be highly individual and idiosyncratic. As critical theorists have argued, individual or group interests may be based on choices that are biased in terms of culture, social class, gender and ability/disability. Therefore further knowledge and understanding are needed about the nature of children's interests and choices, the positive and negative impact of play, power relations and the power effects of free choice.

Conclusion

Policy documents, and policy-related research, provide a necessary but insufficient basis for the development of practice, particularly where instrumental approaches to play are privileged. The integrated approaches outlined here require considerable flexibility and expertise. This in turn highlights the significance of professional knowledge, which underpins the ability of practitioners to formulate educational aims and goals on the basis of their observations and documentation of children's interests and activities, to connect children with substantive curriculum content (within and beyond the defined areas of learning), and to address diversity and equity issues. They also need to understand how children co-construct and convey their own meanings through different forms of activity and representation, and to recognise their emergent knowledge, understandings and misconceptions. Thus it can be argued that in order to maximise the educational potential of play, early childhood educators need a sophisticated pedagogical repertoire that is grounded in contemporary theories and research evidence, and is informed by knowledge and understanding of local cultures and communities. Contextually situated evidence should also be generated from within the early childhood community, with practitioners and academics acting as co-researchers.

Integrated approaches potentially hold considerable promise for developing a greater degree of synchronicity between playing, learning and teaching, and enabling practitioners to consider their roles and responsibilities across the full range of their provision. However, in order to avoid future collision courses, policy frameworks need to be seen as enabling structures rather than straitjackets. Professional decision-making should not be constrained either by legislated frameworks or by policy-related research, particularly where discourses of effectiveness and performance are privileged. This is particularly important in relation to play because maintaining a critical, reflexive stance is integral to addressing issues of equity and social justice, and ensuring that play activities are inclusive for all children. Whilst such critical engagement may be challenging and potentially uncomfortable, it is essential to ongoing transformations in the field.

Note on contributor

Elizabeth Wood is Professor of Education at the University of Exeter. Her specialist areas of research include teachers' professional knowledge and practice; teaching and learning through play, and developing socio-cultural approaches to understanding play, learning and development.

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