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The nature of adult–child interaction in the early years classroom: Implications for children's perceptions of play and subsequent learning behaviour

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ABSTRACT: Within early childhood education, play is central to teaching and learning but it is considered difficult to define and traditionally definitions have been based on adult perceptions of the observable play act. However, play may be most beneficial when it is considered as an approach to a task, and based on a definition of play from the child's perspective. Previous studies have revealed that children define play using cues within their environment and one critical cue is adult presence: Children appear to be less likely to define and approach an activity as play if an adult is present. It is hypothesised that the way adults interact with children may have an effect on children's use of this cue. This study examines adult–child interactions in early years classrooms to identify factors related to children's use of this cue. Findings suggest that issues of control and choice communicated via open questions, and exchanges based on mutual understanding and shared control might be central to this. It is proposed that this style of adult–child interaction needs to be developed in order to co-construct a play-based curriculum to maximise playfulness and hence learning.

RÉSUMÉ: Dès la prime enfance, le jeu a un rôle central dans l'enseignement et l'apprentissage, mais il est considéré comme étant difficile à cerner et ses définitions sont traditionnellement fondées sur la perception qu'a l'adulte de ce qui peut être observé dans le jeu. Cependant, le jeu peut être davantage bénéfique s'il est considéré comme une approche d'une tâche et basé sur une définition du point de vue de l'enfant. Des études précédentes ont montré que les enfants définissent le jeu en utilisant des signaux (cues) présents dans leur environnement et un des signaux les plus importants est la présence de l'adulte: les enfants dans l'étude menée sont apparus comme moins enclins à définir et appréhender une activité comme un jeu si un adulte était présent. Nous avons émis l'hypothèse que la façon dont les adultes interagissent avec les enfants peut avoir un effet sur la façon dont ces derniers utilisent ce signal. Cette étude examine les interactions entre enfants et adultes dans les classes maternelles afin d'identifier les facteurs liés à l'utilisation de ce signal par les enfants. Cette étude examine les interactions entre adultes et enfants dans les classes de premières années pour identifier les facteurs liés à l'utilisation de ce signal par les enfants. Les résultats semblent indiquer qu'il y a des enjeux de contrôle et de choix communiqués au travers de questions ouvertes et d'échanges basés sur une compréhension mutuelle et un contrôle partagé entre enfants sont des éléments centraux. Ce style d'interaction adulte-enfant devrait être développé afin de co-construire un curriculum fondé sur le jeu, afin d'optimaliser le plaisir du jeu et par conséquent l'apprentissage.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Spiel ist von zentraler Bedeutung für das Lehren und Lernen im Bereich der frühkindlichen Bildung. Allerdings gilt Spiel als schwer zu definieren, und traditionelle Definitionen beruhen auf der Wahrnehmung von beobachtbaren Spiel-Akten durch Erwachsene. Möglicherweise hat Spiel den größten pädagogischen Effekt, wenn es als ein Ansatz zur Lösung einer Aufgabe angesehen wird, und wenn es aus der Perspektive des Kindes als Spiel definiert wird. Frühere Studien haben gezeigt, dass Kinder Spiel mit Bezug auf 'cues' in ihrer Umgebung definieren. Ein bedeutsamer 'cue' ist dabei die Anwesenheit von Erwachsenen: Kinder scheinen eine Tätigkeit weniger als 'Spiel' zu definieren, wenn ein Erwachsener in der Nähe ist. Es wird angenommen, dass die Art und Weise, in der Erwachsene mit Kindern interagieren, Auswirkungen auf das kindlichen Spiel haben. Die vorliegende Studie untersucht Erwachsenen-Kind-Interaktionen in Vorschulklassen, um Faktoren zu identifizieren, die im Zusammenhang mit der kindlichen Definition von 'Spiel' stehen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass in diesem Zusammenhang Aspekte wie Kontrolle und Wahlmöglichkeiten von Bedeutung sind. Dabei sind offene Fragen sowie ein Kommunikationsstil wesentlich, der von gegenseitigem Verständnis und gemeinsamen Entscheidungen geprägt ist. Es wird vorgeschlagen, diesen Stil der Erwachsenen-Kind-Interaktion weiter zu entwickeln mit dem Ziel, ein ko-konstruiertes, Spiel-basiertes Curriculum zu entwickeln, um 'playfulness' und damit Lernen zu fördern.

RESUMEN: Dentro de la educación de la primera infancia, el juego es fundamental para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje, pero se considera difícil de definir y, tradicionalmente, las definiciones se han basado en las percepciones de los adultos de juego observable. Sin embargo, el juego puede ser más beneficioso cuando se considera como una aproximación a una tarea, y basado en a una definición de juego desde la perspectiva del niño. Estudios previos han revelado que los niños definen el jugar con las señales en su entorno y una referencia fundamental es la presencia de adultos: Los niños parecen ser menos propensos a definir y acercarse a una actividad como un juego si un adulto está presente. En esta hipótesis la forma en que los adultos se relacionan con niños puede tener un efecto sobre el uso de esta señal por parte de los niños. Este estudio analiza las interacciones entre adultos y niños en las aulas de los primeros años para identificar los factores relacionados con el uso los niños de esta señal. Los resultados sugieren que las cuestiones de que hacen control y elección comunicadas a través de preguntas abiertas, y los intercambios basados en la comprensión mutua y el control compartido pueden ser fundamentales para esto. Se propone que este estilo de interacción adulto-niño necesita ser desarrollada con el fin de co-construir un plan de estudios basado en el juego para aprovechar al máximo el juego y por lo tanto, el aprendizaje.

Keywords: play; playfulness; control; choice; adult–child interactions

Introduction

A fundamental tenet within early years education is that play is essential for learning and development (Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2009). Consequently, play has been seen as central to the education of young children and is firmly embedded within many preschool curricula (e.g. Pramling Samuelsson, Sheridan, and Williams 2006). The prominent place of play within these curricula reflects a longstanding belief in its developmental and educative potential. In order to maximise this potential it is important to understand, in detail, the relationship between play and learning. The purpose of the current article is to explore how adult presence affects children's perceptions of play and therefore playful learning. It is particularly important to understand this because there are strong reasons to believe adult presence should enable playful learning

(Rogers and Evans 2008) but recent empirical evidence suggests that under some circumstances adult presence may inhibit playful learning (McInnes et al. 2010; Whitebread et al. 2007). With the help of detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis of two English Early Years classrooms we attempt to show how this apparent paradox can be resolved and best practice adopted.

What is play?

A central problem in evidencing play is the lack of an agreed definition. Different definitions of play have been proposed: by category (e.g. Piaget 1951; Smilansky 1968), by criteria (e.g. Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg 1983) and continuum (e.g. Pellegrini 1991). However, they all have their limitations and focus on the observable act of play from an adult perspective (Howard 2002). It has been suggested that a more valuable approach is one that focuses on play from a child's perspective (Hewes 2010). A child's view of play not only focuses on the observable act but also gives insight into the internal, affective quality of play which is important for learning, namely playfulness. The construct of playfulness is argued to be an attitude of mind which indicates the approach taken to an activity. It is thought to be important for development and learning by promoting enthusiasm, motivation, willingness to engage in an activity and flexibility of thought (Dewey 1933; Lieberman 1977).

Previous studies on children's perceptions of play have shown that children use a variety of cues to differentiate between activities that are seen as play and those that are not (e.g. Howard, Bellin, and Rees 2003; Keating et al. 2000; Wing 1995). The cues can be categorised as either *emotional* such as the amount of choice a child has in an activity, whether the activity is voluntary or not and how easy it is or *environmental* such as where the activity takes place, whether or not an adult is involved and the physical nature of the activity. The presence of these cues, determine whether an activity is more or less like play. It has also been suggested that cue development is related to classroom experience with children who are in more play-oriented and less structured settings blurring the distinctions between play and not play, therefore viewing and approaching more activities as play like. Conversely, children in more teacher-directed and structured settings are more likely to have a clearer cue distinction between play and not play activities and subsequently take a playful approach to fewer and more strictly defined tasks (Howard, Bellin, and Rees 2003; Karrby 1989). Utilising the cues children use to define play has provided a basis for research attempting to evidence the relationship between play, learning and adult presence.

Empirical evidence on the relationship between play, learning and adult presence

There has been a limited, but growing, body of empirical evidence demonstrating the relationship between play and learning (e.g. BERA 2003; Dansky and Silverman 1973; Sylva, Bruner, and Genova 1976). More recent studies have further supported the link between the two (McInnes et al. 2009; Thomas, Howard, and Miles 2006). In these studies the cues children use to define play and not play: adult presence, location and voluntary nature of the action, have been manipulated to create playful (adult proximal, on floor, choice) and formal (adult present, at table, no choice) practice conditions. In a four stage pre-test, practice, post-test, delayed post-test procedure it has been demonstrated that children who practice the same problem solving task under playful rather than formal practice conditions exhibit significantly improved

performance in terms of time taken to complete the task and task accuracy. In addition, behaviourally these children are more focused, attentive and motivated towards the task and are more likely to rate the practice condition as play.

The results of the above studies, especially the observational data collected by McInnes et al. (2009), indicated that adult presence may have been a decisive factor in inhibiting learning and this has been investigated more thoroughly (McInnes et al. 2010). Using the same pre-test, practice, post-test and delayed post-test procedure, results showed that children's performance was enhanced (demonstrated by quicker performance and fewer errors), behaviours were more conducive to learning and children were more likely to perceive the activity as play when an adult was proximal to the activity rather than directly present.

Together these data (Thomas, Howard, and Miles 2006; McInnes et al. 2009, 2010) suggest that understanding and manipulating the cues children use to define play can enhance children's feelings of playfulness, their attitude and approach to a task and subsequent learning. Combined with studies which indicate that classroom experience influences cue use (Howard, Bellin, and Rees 2003; Karrby 1989), it suggests that children need to perceive adult presence differently so that this cue will not be used to differentiate between play and not play activities and learning may not be inhibited.

The role of adults in the early years classroom

Traditonally, the role of teacher/practitioner in early childhood is considered essential in enabling development (e.g. Ashiabi 2007). Effective pedagogy in the early years appears to be one where the adult takes a variety of roles, from directing activities to ones where the child takes the lead. Findings from the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002) show that effective settings use a combination of adult-led and child-led activities and that adults need to engage and interact with children building on children's own activities. However, in relation to play this is often problematic for practitioners and there is often a mismatch between what practitioners believe and say about play and their practice (Bennett, Wood, and Rogers 1997; McInnes et al. 2011; Pascal 1990).

Studies have repeatedly shown that many teachers are not comfortable with play and child-led activities, and that play is held in low esteem compared to activities which are seen as work (Bennett, Wood, and Rogers 1997; King 1978). In addition, children are provided with fewer child-initiated activities and less choice than is often stated and adults tend to involve themselves in work, rather than play activities (Linklater 2006; Sylva, Roy, and Painter 1980; Wood, McMahon, and Cranstoun 1980). Following the work of Vygotsky (1976), greater emphasis has been placed on the role of the adult and Johnson, Christie, and Wardle (2005) state that teacher involvement in play activities has been increasing, however, the quality of this involvement is questionable and has been shown to be more concerned with managing and monitoring, rather than on supporting development and co-constructing activities with children (Bennett, Wood, and Rogers 1997; Kontos 1999; Pramling Samuelsson, and Johansson 2009; Rogers and Evans 2008).

An important aspect of adults' pedagogical interactions with children is the language they use. It has been shown that language which effectively facilitates development is based on shared problem solving and the use of open questioning techniques (Alexander 2004; Chappell et al. 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002). However, it has been shown that the use of this type of language amongst teachers is far from

common within educational settings. Tizard and Hughes (1984) showed that talk at home was different to talk at school with more opportunities for learning through language found in the home. The ORACLE study (Galton et al. 1999), which looked at teacher's use of language with children in secondary schools, showed that teachers overwhelmingly used statements and closed questions when teaching. Similar results were found with primary school teacher's use of language and that direct teaching and monitoring were the most common child–adult pedagogical interactions (Tizard et al. 1988).

Within early years education there are similar findings. Wood, McMahon, and Cranstoun (1980) found that early years teachers primarily asked closed questions or questions they already knew the answer to and that peer-to-peer dialogue was more extensive than adult to child dialogue. More recently, the large scale EPPE study, found that out of all questions asked by practitioners working in early years settings only 5% of them were open questions (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002).

In conclusion, it is suggested that in settings where play activities are left to children, and adult–child interactions are through direct teaching using simple language and closed questions the cue of adult presence is more likely to be used to distinguish between play and not play activities. In settings where play is co-constructed between children and adults with more shared adult–child interactions, the cue of adult presence is less likely to be used in making play and not play distinctions. This will then result in children taking a more playful approach and attitude to task which will have consequences for their subsequent learning behaviour (Howard and McInnes 2010).

The study

This small scale, systematic study of adult presence in play was conducted in two English early years settings, one where adult presence was perceived by children to indicate an activity was not play, and one where adult presence was not used as a defining cue for play. The purpose of this study was to explore adult–child interactions in the classroom to identify how this might affect children's perceptions of adult presence (as a cue to play or not play). In particular it was felt that by looking at a setting where teacher presence was not used as a cue to define play, in comparison with a setting where it was, it would be possible to gain information about why these differences were occurring and make recommendations about how to facilitate learning though play.

Two geographically close and socio-economically similar study sites were selected; a reception class in a primary school (setting A) where adult presence *was not used* as a cue to distinguish play and not play activities and a reception class in an infant school (setting B) where adult presence *was used*. Practitioners in setting A based their practice on High/Scope philosophy. They followed a structured weekly timetable divided into whole class activities and activity time. During activity time children were able to choose from child-initiated activities and small group, adult-initiated activities. Practitioners had a clear understanding of play and how this facilitated learning. Practitioners in setting B also followed High/Scope philosophy but did not have a structured weekly timetable. Daily routines included whole class activities, adult-directed small group activities which children had to attend and activity time which consisted of child-initiated activities. Practitioners were less secure in their understanding of play (for a fuller description of practitioner beliefs see McInnes et al. 2011).

These contrasting sites were identified with the help of a photographic sorting task known as the Contextual Apperception Procedure (Howard 2002). This is where children sort photographs which are differentiated according to cue, in this case absence or presence of an adult, into play or not play. In setting A children did not sort the photographs into play or not play dependent upon adult presence but in setting B children sorted the photographs into play if an adult was absent from the picture and not play if an adult was present. Having established the differences in adult presence cue use between the two settings the main element of the study then examined adult–child interactions in these settings.

Method

The Sample: Using the Contextual Apperception Procedure four children from each study site were chosen based on cue use (total $n = 8$). Two boys and two girls who did not use the cue of adult presence to differentiate between play and not play activities were selected from setting A, these were termed *low cuers*. Their ages ranged from 4.5 years to 5.2 years with a mean age of 4.9 years. From setting B four children, two boys and two girls, who did use the cue of adult presence were selected and these were termed *high cuers*. Their ages ranged from 4.4. years to 5.0 years with a mean age of 4.6 years.

Ethics: Informed written consent was gained from parents and carers for their children to be audio recorded and observed. Children's verbal consent was also gained prior to the onset of the study. Consent from children was also gained to place an audio recorder on them and they were told it could be removed at any time. However, this was not an issue in this study as children were keen to wear the device. It was removed for PE for health and safety reasons and for whole school assemblies as this involved adults and children from whom consent had not been obtained. Informed consent was also gained from practitioners in the study and feedback from the study was given to inform and develop their practice further.

Test materials: A Diasonic Linear PCM voice recorder (DDR-5300) with microphone was used to audio record children during the sessions. This is a lightweight and discrete device that allows flexibility of children's movement whilst at the same time capturing high quality audio footage. In addition, an observation schedule sheet was adapted from Sylva, Roy, and Painter (1980) which the researcher maintained throughout the recorded sessions. The following headings for recording observations were used: time of observation, activity engaged in, language used and who was involved in the social interaction.

Procedure: Each child was audio recorded for one morning and one afternoon session in their classroom, three hours and two hours respectively, on different days. The children wore the Diasonic recorder on their person to allow a full account of all verbal interaction to be captured. Not all of the data collected and transcribed was used for analysis. The same hour and a half of the morning session and hour of the afternoon sessions was analysed for each child. Data collection during these time periods ensured that a range of groupings, activities, curriculum areas and adult–child interactions were sampled.

The stance of non-participant observer was taken in the settings and the researcher's observational role was communicated to all adults and children. This kept adult–child interactions between researcher and child to a minimum. The adapted observation schedule was used to conduct narrative observations which allowed the adult–child interactions to be understood in context during transcription.

Overview of findings

The results of this study are based on the data collected from the eight children and are organised in the following way: an analysis of initiation of talk during adult–child interactions. However, this has been reported in a previous paper (McInnes et al. 2011), therefore an overview is given here. An analysis is reported of interactions during whole class time (WCT), small group time (SGT) and activity time with a focus on closed and open questions as used in the ORACLE study (Galton et al. 1999). Language is also analysed according to the analytic categories of control, choice and problem solving. These categories were chosen as ones which would elucidate co-construction of activities most clearly (Howard and McInnes 2010).

Initiation of adult–child interactions

Adult–child interactions were previously analysed by McInnes et al. (2011) according to who initiated them and the reasons for initiating dialogue. The main significant finding was that in setting A, during the adult-led SGT activity, initiation was generally by the child as they had to ask about the nature of the activity before making a choice as to whether or not to join in. In setting B during the adult-led SGT adults initiated interactions.

Reasons for initiating dialogue were different between the two settings during activity time and were different for adults and children. In setting A, adults initiated talk with children during activity time in order to manage activity time and the activities children were engaged in. Adults also asked general questions to check how children were getting on with their activity or if they wanted to do anything else. They also told children what they had been doing during activity time. In setting B adults initiated interactions with children to manage planning, routines or behaviour.

Children initiated interaction with adults during activity time for a variety of reasons. In setting A they told the adult what they were doing, talked about their activity to gain attention or provided general information about their play. They asked questions to further their understanding about an activity or the general routine of the session. In setting B children initiated interactions with adults for only two reasons; to either ask to go to another activity or to tell the adult about their work.

The nature of adult and child utterances

The questions and statements adults used when interacting with children were analysed in more depth.

Adult utterances during WCT and SGT

Overall, during WCT in setting A, adults were mainly telling children about the task (42%) followed by asking them closed questions (23%). Children were also given lots of praise (19%). No open questions were asked during this time. During SGT adults asked more closed questions (32%) followed by telling children about the task (25%). There was also feedback for children about the task (18%) and praise (7%). Children were also asked open questions.

In setting B, during WCT, adults primarily asked closed questions (64%) and told children facts or talked about the task. One open question was asked during the morning session and no praise was given. During SGT, again, a high percentage of closed

Table 1. Comparison of closed questions asked during SGTs in settings A and B.

	Closed question	Other utterance	Total
Setting A	9	19	28
Setting B	77	46	123
Total	86	65	151

questions were asked (67%). A comparison was made between settings A and B to see if the difference in closed questions asked during SGT was significant (see Table 1).

A Chi Square test indicated a significant association between setting and closed question use during SGT ($\chi^2 = 8.63$, df = 1, $p = .05$). Adults in setting B were more likely to ask closed questions during SGT than adults in setting A.

Adult utterances during activity time

During activity time in setting A, adult utterances were relatively evenly split between questions (44%) and statements (56%). Both open and closed questions were asked however there were more closed than open, (26% compared to 18%) Many utterances were concerned with telling children about the task (15%) and giving them feedback (10%). There was still praise for children (7%).

In setting B utterances were evenly split between questions (53%) and statements (47%) Again, a high percentage of closed questions were asked (42%) and a comparison was made between the closed questions asked during activity time in the two settings and the open questions asked during this time (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Total closed questions as compared to other utterances during activity time across settings A and B.

	Utterance		
	Closed questions	Other utterances	Total
Setting A	37	113	150
Setting B	61	85	146
Total	98	198	296

Chi Square indicated a significant association between setting and closed questions asked during activity time ($\chi^2 = 9.79$, df = 1, $p = .05$). Adults in setting B were more likely to ask closed questions during activity time than adults in setting A.

Table 3. Total open questions as compared to other utterances during activity time across settings A and B.

	Utterance		
	Open questions	Other utterances	Total
Setting A	27	123	150
Setting B	7	139	146
Total	34	262	296

A significant association between setting and open questions asked by adults during this time was found ($\chi^2 = 12.7$, df = 1, $p < .05$). Adults in setting A were more likely to ask open questions during activity time than adults in setting B.

Further analysis of open questions

The number and percentage of open questions asked by adults and children across the two settings differed considerably. This was analysed in more detail in order to be able to understand this difference. Specifically analysis focused on the type of open question utilised and examples can be found in Table 4 below.

The types of open questions asked by adults in setting A could be categorised in three ways: open questions in relation to starting activity time, to extending the activity and to extending thinking which has been termed possibility thinking (Chappell et al. 2008). Open questions relating to the activity itself required deeper thinking from the child in order to respond appropriately to questions and responses required children to think beyond the activity and either explain what they had done or how they could make it better. Open questions related to possibility thinking required children to reflect more deeply on what they had done and reason or reflect on their thinking, a form of metacognition. Questions of this type were asked frequently by adults in this setting.

The open questions asked by adults in setting B could be categorised in four ways. The same three categories were used as setting A. Open questions were asked to start activities and they were also used to ask about the activity however, answers to these questions only involved a small number of possibilities. Only two open questions were asked which involved deeper thinking from the child; one concerned with explanation

Table 4. Type of open questions asked by adults in settings A and B.

	Type of open question	Example
Setting A	Starting activity time	What would you like to choose?
		What shall we put in the choosing tray?
		What are you going to play?
	Extending the activity	How did you do that?
		How could we make it stronger?
	Extending thinking	Look, it's got little dots, why has it come out like that?
		How does it go faster?
		How did you know how many to do?
Setting B	Starting activity time	Where would you like to work?
		Where would you like to plan?
	Extending the activity	What sort of things are you going to put on your picture?
		What do you think you might like to do in there?
	Extending thinking	I like that colour, how would you describe it?
		What do you think?
	Open question followed by closed question	What are you going to do? Shall I tell you where you haven't been? Would that make it easier? You can go outside if you like?

and one involving a range of possibilities. However, in this setting an additional category of open questions that were closed down was also required. Questions in this category involved quite long utterances as at least two questions were asked in sequence; an open question followed by a closed question.

Language signifying control and choice

The use of open questions and statements gave an indication of choice and control and this language was analysed more closely. Examples of this type of language used in the two settings can be found in Table 5 below. Children in setting A appeared to have more choice and control over when they started and finished activities during activity time. Children in setting A frequently made utterances to indicate they were going to change activities whereas children in setting B either asked to change activities or were told by the adult to change. Both types of utterance in setting B indicated that the control in activity change resided with the adult.

At times adult control was implied rather than explicit when reminding children of the rules, for example in setting B adults often asked questions to remind children to put their name on their work. In setting A children knew and enforced the rules themselves, thereby maintaining control over their activities.

Activity time is considered to be child initiated and under the child's control and usually when children chose their activities this was preceded by a question from the adult asking children where they would like to go. Sometimes in setting A this was not indicated by asking a question but by making a statement implying choice, in this way the child still chose the activity. In setting B, as previously indicated, a child might be asked an open question regarding where to plan but this would then be closed down by the adult or sometimes the child would be told where to go so although the statement might be framed with an element of choice in reality children always went where the adult suggested. During activity time children should be given choice and control. In setting A this was signalled by adults making suggestions however in setting B children were generally told what to do.

Table 5. Language signifying control and choice used in settings A and B.

	Setting A	Setting B
Starting and finishing activities	I'm going inside now, I'm cold. (C)	Can I plan somewhere else? (C)
	I'm finished I'm going. (C)	Do you want to go in for five minutes? (A)
Rule enforcement	I'm going to put my name on it and my face which is me. (C)	How do I know it's yours? (A)
Choosing an activity	If you would like to go to the café off you go. (A)	You can go outside if you like. (A)
Choice during an activity	You might want to practice your letters or numbers? (A)	I want you to build something. (A)
	You might want to do a pattern or picture? (A)	What are you going to make me? (A)

A = language used by adult.

C = language used by child.

Language for problem solving

Language is important for problem solving and Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) discuss the importance of sustained interactions between adults and children which facilitate problem solving termed 'sustained shared thinking'. Sustained interactions are only possible when there is mutual understanding of a subject and control is shared between the participants. They identify more of this type of interaction within what are deemed effective early years settings which are characterised by practice with a mix of adult-led and child-led activities. An important component of this interaction type is open questioning and this was more evident in setting A. Other types of statements were also used to encourage children's thinking and in setting A, a term frequently used to initially encourage thinking was 'have a think'. This was used to encourage children, not just to choose an activity, but to think about what they would do when they got there. Children mirrored use of this language with a child asking another child 'are you thinking?'

However, sustained interactions which facilitate problem solving are more complex and involve dialogue to challenge, support and praise children's thinking; again more examples of this type of dialogue were found in setting A, such as the following:

T: 'So which way does it move now?'
C: 'That way'
T: 'How could we make it stronger? It's got a dip in the middle'
C: 'I think the idea is to put some more wheels on it'
T: 'Do you think that would be a good idea, K? What could we put underneath there then?'
C: 'A pen? Oh look this pen goes underneath. Oh, that doesn't work then, okay'
T: 'What about … ?'
C: 'Miss. B this is … , these wheels might work'
T: 'Will that work, have a look at how you put them on'
C: 'There we are I've put that on'.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine adult–child interactions in two early years classroom settings; one where children used the cue of adult presence to differentiate play and not play activities and one where they did not. In total adult–child interactions from eight children (four from each setting) were analysed so that insight could be gained into cue use and how this could be used to inform practice. Both settings engaged in a mix of adult-led and child-led activities but there were considerable differences in adult–child interactions.

Adults initiated talk during WCTs in both settings which would be expected and these times would generally not be considered as play. Children tended to initiate talk and share control during SGTs in setting A whilst adults took control in setting B. Sharing control during a traditional adult-led activity would blur the boundaries of who had control and potentially enable children to perceive the adult as more playful. This was especially so in setting A as children could choose when to participate in small group activities. There was equal initiation of talk between adults and children during activity time in the two settings however the reasons for initiation were different.

In both settings adults tended to initiate talk to manage behaviour and activities. In setting B they also managed routines. Managing and monitoring behaviour has been found to be a frequent role of adults during play (Bennett, Wood, and Rogers 1997;

Kontos 1999; Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson 2009) and places control with the adult. In setting A, adults also told children what they had been doing thus engaging with children as play partners and sharing control, important aspects of co-constructing play.

There were differences in child initiation between the two settings. In setting A, children were more likely to initiate language and this could signal more equal relationships between adults and children and a sharing of control. In setting B, children tended to initiate language to ask to change an activity or to get attention for their work. This emphasised adult control and the importance of a managerial and monitoring role. Overall, variation in the initiation of language between the two sites indicated differences in the adult role and control afforded to children with more examples of adults and children sharing control and co-constructing in setting A than setting B. These differences in experience of being offered control and choice would appear to result in differences in the perception of the adult as a play partner and consequently the use of the cue of adult presence as a defining feature of play and not play activities.

Analysis of adult utterances during SGT and activity time showed that more closed questions were asked than open questions, a finding in other studies (Galton et al. 1999; Wood, McMahon, and Cranstoun 1980). However, the difference in number of closed and open questions asked in setting A was much closer than in setting B. In addition, adults in setting A seemed to ask significantly more open questions than adults in setting B and more closed questions were asked in setting B than setting A. In fact, adults in setting A asked more open questions than has been found previously (18% compared to 5%) (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2008). This is considered to be a feature of effective settings (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002) and is an indicator of shared control and co-constructing during activities. In setting B it appeared that adults were aware of the importance of asking open questions, as these were asked, however it seemed that the issue of control prevented them from allowing children to always answer and open questions were often closed down by immediately asking a closed question or by telling children what to do. Again, asking more open questions and sharing control would imply that children would be less likely to perceive adult presence as a cue when making play and not play distinctions.

The types of open questions that adults asked in the two settings were similar. In both settings adults asked open questions to start activity time, a feature that would be expected from settings employing High/Scope methodology. However, more open questions seemed to be asked in setting A that extended thinking and involved possibility thinking and sustained shared thinking (Chappell et al. 2008; Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva 2004). These types of interactions afforded children more choice and control as well as a providing a more playful and interactive environment.

Conclusion

This study has examined adult–child interactions in two English early years settings through detailed analysis of adult–child interactions from eight children. Four children from a setting where children do not use the cue of adult presence to distinguish between play and not play activities and four children from one where they do. Adult–child interactions in the setting where children do not use the cue of adult presence is marked by shared initiation of interactions, greater use of open questions by adults and children and greater use of language which affords control and choice to

children. In the setting where children do use the cue of adult presence, adults have greater control over initiation of interactions, use more closed questions and use language in which control and choice resides with the adult.

It is proposed that these differences in language use between the settings contribute to children's use of the cue of adult presence to differentiate play and not play situations. Previous research has shown that experience influences children's cue use. In setting A where children experienced choice and control through sustained and playful interactions with the adult they were more likely to perceive the adult as playful and not use the cue of adult presence to differentiate between play and not play activities. In setting B children were less likely to experience choice and control in this way and consequently were more likely to use the cue of adult presence as a defining feature of play.

This has implications for learning as experimental studies indicate that children who practice tasks under playful practice conditions where the adult is proximal, rather than formal practice conditions where the adult is present, perform and behave in ways that are more effective for learning. In order to maximise the potential for play in the classroom adults need to ensure that children have less opportunity to develop the cue of adult presence as a defining feature of play as in setting A. This requires adults to move away from traditional adult definitions of play and understand play from the child's perspective. In doing this they can utilise the cues children use to define play and offer an experience where adults afford children choice and control through the language they use and co-construct a play-based curriculum. In this way they can maximise children's feelings of playfulness which goes beyond the type of activities offered (Howard and McInnes 2010; Rogers and Evans 2008).

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