

SUMMARY FROM PLAY RESEARCH SEMINAR, 2008

Nine researchers established in the field of play scholarship presented findings at Leeds Metropolitan University in April. Other national and international delegates were in attendance. The seminar explored contemporary research on children as playful learners and on adults as playful pedagogues. The research evidence is summarised under these two headings together with suggestions for developing a future research agenda. Few researchers are currently active in this field reflecting a general lack of funding.

Children as playful learners

Play and emotional and cognitive development are interconnected. Children engaged in play situations show greater evidence of problem-solving abilities and creativity. Children engaged in playful tasks they have initiated show higher levels of cognitive self-regulation. *(Dr. David Whitebread, University of Cambridge).*

Children respond positively and quickly when adults convey the acceptance of playful learning in the classroom. Children for whom play is a regular and fulfilling occurrence in the classroom showed improved performance on problem-solving, number and literacy tasks. *(Dr. Justine Howard, University of Swansea).*

Social free play is an evolved behaviour, and is important for complex, autonomous social behaviour leading to self-knowledge and social competence in all primate species; rough and tumble play experience is essential for all juvenile primates, including human children, to independently learn the necessary skills to fully engage in the complex social relationships underlying adult society. *(Dr. Pam Jarvis, Bradford College)*

Play can promote conflict resolution skills in young children; highly social and cooperative play in classrooms has clear links with learning, progression and identity formation. *(Professor Pat Broadhead, Leeds Metropolitan University).*

Risky play is difficult to theorise but essential for well-being; children need opportunities to push themselves beyond boundaries in familiar environments; schools and classrooms have become risk averse places and this is detrimental to children's development and well-being. *(Dr. Helen Tovey, Roehampton University, London)*

Children have many ways of making meaning (multi-modality) and this is facilitated through imaginative play; there are clear links between playful meaning making and the meanings made as they use marks for early writing and for early written mathematics – key aspects of children's learning. *(Maulfry Worthington: Free University Amsterdam)*

Children's role play is naturally influenced by the media; this is their culture and should be respected and understood; there are no polar opposites between their on-line and off-line worlds; motivation for reading/writing is high in virtual worlds, including in social networking sites. *(Professor Jackie Marsh, University of Sheffield)*

Further research is needed in order to:

- extend our understanding of bio-cultural development and how this might influence curriculum and pedagogies;
- develop professionals' understanding of the links between cooperative play and intellectual development and of children's capacity to develop strategies for conflict resolution during social and cooperative play;
- understand pedagogies which respect children and which develop a climate of trust in early years settings.
- gather evidence of children's capacities to make meaningful choices and take the lead in their play;
- gain insights into how children's self-initiated activities lead to deeper, more sustained learning experiences.

Adults as playful pedagogues

A pedagogy of play is only gradually being defined. Practitioners continue have problems defining their role, assessing children's learning through play, and understanding when and how to be involved. Play in early years settings is operating to an outcomes-led agenda which is contrary to the true nature of play. *(Professor Elizabeth Wood, University of Exeter).*

Understanding the complexity of children's play as a work in progress is demanding for educators as they tend to engage in partial observations; educators need help in understanding the ways in which different areas of play provision can contribute to children's learning and how this is taken forward through planning and record keeping *(Professor Pat Broadhead, Leeds Metropolitan University)*

Practitioners are reluctant to allow or enable children to take risks, they see danger rather than competence and subversion rather than confidence; children who lack access to challenging, adventurous play can become risk averse or reckless and do not develop the skills to be safe. *(Dr. Helen Tovey, Roehampton University, London)*

Only knowledgeable adults can interpret the complex, inner meanings of children's play but this ability can be learned through observation of children and through professional dialogue *(Maulfry Worthington, Free University Amsterdam).*

Educators need a deeper understanding of children's computer use in the home; it is becoming very sophisticated at an early age for some children. *(Professor Jackie Marsh, University of Sheffield)*

When teachers understand play, its provision and potential, then children respond with multi-layered narratives and make powerful links between events in their home and school lives: teachers can respect and engage with the uncertainty of play in relation to its inherent learning potential *(Kathy Goouch, Canterbury Christchurch University)*

Further research is needed in order to:

- develop a shared language and shared professional knowledge about the characteristics of play and playful learning in educational settings;
- strengthen understanding of how playful learning and the given curriculum can interconnect and extend professionals' confidence in making meaningful links;
- underpin professional development in observing and learning from play observations through joint activity and reflection (at pre- and in-service levels);
- develop professional understanding of the links between cooperative play and intellectual development and of children's capacity to develop conflict resolution strategies during social and cooperative play;
- determine how play in educational settings generates creative thinking for adults and children.
- enable exemplary play pedagogues to share their excellent practice and understandings with others, including collaborative action research projects.

