

CHAPTER 2

DEVELOPING A PEDAGOGY OF PLAY

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Introduction

One of the fundamental principles in early childhood education is the importance of play to children's learning and development. The commitment to play can be traced through theory and ideology into early childhood programmes in many different countries (Saracho and Spodek, 2002; Wood and Attfield, 2005). While there is substantial evidence on *learning* through play, there has been less evidence on *teaching* through play. Linking play and pedagogy has long been a contentious area, because of the ideological commitment to free play and free choice (Wood, 2008). However, contemporary theoretical and policy changes have shifted the focus to better understanding the distinctive purposes and nature of play in education settings, and the role of adults in planning for play and playfulness in child-initiated or teacher-directed activities. The aim of this chapter is to examine the pedagogy of play, which is defined broadly as the ways in which early childhood professionals make provision for play and playful approaches to learning and teaching, how they design play/learning environments, and all the pedagogical decisions, techniques and strategies they use to support or enhance learning and teaching through play. This definition can also be extended to include home-based pedagogies of play, and the ways in which children act as playful pedagogues in their self-initiated activities. The main focus in this chapter is on play in early childhood settings that provide care and education (birth to age 7). Three key themes are addressed: the influence of national curriculum policies in the United Kingdom, the validation for a pedagogy of play in a range of contexts (home, preschool and school), critical issues on play in theory and in practice, and future directions in research and scholarship.

Policy contexts

The UK education policy context, outlined in Chapter 1, reflects ongoing concerns with providing guidance on curriculum content, planning and assessment, improving the quality and effectiveness of provision, and developing 'joined-up' provision and services for children and their families. The Early Years Foundation Stage in England (DfEE/QCA, 2000) was broadly welcomed by the early childhood community because of the emphasis placed on the role and value of play in supporting learning at home and in educational settings. This framework was subsequently revised to include children from birth to 5 (DfES, 2007a), and was aligned with wider social policy issues in *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004a and b). The curriculum guidance documents articulate the principles that underpin pedagogy, curriculum and assessment with an emphasis on well-planned experiences based on children's spontaneous play (both indoors and outdoors); allowing time for children to become engrossed in their play, and to create and solve problems; engagement between children and adults, and provision of a wide range of creative and imaginative activities to stimulate learning and development. The role of the practitioner includes:

- planning and resourcing challenging learning environments;
- supporting children's learning through planned and spontaneous play activities;
- extending and developing children's language and communication in their play;
- observing and assessing children's learning through play;
- ensuring continuity and progression.

Good quality play is linked to positive learning outcomes in the cognitive, emotional, social and psycho-motor domains, and in the six areas of learning. A commitment to play and talk for Reception children (age 4–5) in the first year at school is stated in both the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (see Chapter 1). The Foundation Phase in Wales, which is being rolled out across the country from 2008, extends continuity in the commitment to play as a key approach to learning across ages 3–7 (ACCAC, 2004).

There are common principles in UK policy frameworks that endorse a combination of adult-directed and child-initiated activities, including free and structured play. Validation for integrated pedagogical approaches can be found in play scholarship (Wood, 2008) and in the highly influential government-funded study on Effective Provision for Preschool Education (EPPE) (www.ioe.ac.uk/projects/epe). This large-scale longitudinal study has provided detailed evidence of the impact of pre-school education and family background on children's development. EPPE has demonstrated links between higher quality provision and better child outcomes and explored the specific pedagogical actions that link play with positive learning outcomes (Sylva et al., 2007). In the related study on Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock et al., 2002) the authors distinguish between pedagogical interactions (specific behaviours on the part of adults)

and pedagogical framing (the behind-the-scenes aspects of pedagogy which include planning, resources and routines). Their findings show that:

The most effective (excellent) settings provide both and achieve a balance between the opportunities provided for children to benefit from teacher-initiated group work and the provision of freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities. (2002: 43)

Indicators of effective pedagogy include opportunities for co-construction between children and adults, including 'sustained shared thinking', joint involvement in child- and adult-initiated activities and informed interactions in children's self-initiated and free-play activities. The practitioner's role is conceptualised as proactive in creating play/learning environments, as well as responsive to children's choices, interests and patterns of learning.

These pedagogical recommendations are informed by sociocultural theories, which also underpin contemporary early childhood curriculum models; for example *Te Whāriki* in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1996a), First Steps (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994), Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997; Krogh and Slentz, 2001) and Reggio Emilia (Rinaldi, 2006). A consistent feature of these models is that learning through play is not left to chance, but is sustained through complex reciprocal and responsive relationships, and is situated in activities that are socially constructed and mediated. While children's interests remain central to curriculum planning, the subject disciplines enrich and extend children's learning. Although contemporary curriculum models endorse play within integrated pedagogical approaches, achieving good quality play in practice remains a considerable challenge, particularly in the UK where teachers face competing demands for accountability, performance and achievement, and competing notions of what constitutes effective teaching and learning (Wood, 2007, 2008). The next section examines play in theory and practice and reviews some of the key studies that support a pedagogy of play, as well as those that argue for more critical engagement with the play ethos.

Play in theory and practice

The commitment to play in early childhood is both challenged and reinforced by theory and research evidence, and is reflected in the diversity in play scholarship (Johnson et al., 2005; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Theoretically there has been a shift away from experimental studies rooted in developmental psychology towards broader theoretical and methodological frameworks for researching and understanding play. Contemporary studies have adopted a range of orientations, drawing on post-structural, feminist and critical theories (Blaise, 2005; Yelland, 2005) and socio-cultural theories (Broadhead, 2004; Kalliala, 2006). Because the term 'play' encompasses many different activities, research studies have focused on different types of play, different aspects of play behaviours, the influence of contexts on play and interactions in communities or groups of players. There is substantial evidence that

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through play children demonstrate improved verbal communication, high levels of social and interaction skills, creative use of play materials, imaginative and divergent thinking skills and problem-solving capabilities (Wood and Attfield, 2005). Play and playful forms of activity potentially lead towards increasingly complex forms of knowledge, skills and understanding, particularly in the cognitive and social domains.

In the context of practice, research evidence shows that play is problematic, particularly beyond the preschool phase. In a collaborative study with nine Reception class teachers in England, Bennett et al. (1997) found that play was limited in frequency, duration and quality, with adults adopting a predominantly non-interventionist approach. Good quality learning outcomes were not always achieved, and progression in learning through play was difficult to sustain. The teachers identified instances where they had over- or under-estimated children's competencies (social, cognitive and physical-manipulative). In the episodes that did not provide good-quality learning experiences, the children were frustrated, struggling, lacking a focus or messing about. In more successful play activities children were purposefully engaged and the teachers' intentions were realised, at least in part.

By acting as co-participants in the study, the teachers reconsidered their role in play. They agreed on the importance of supportive frameworks for developing and assessing children's skills as players and learners, while guarding against too much planning and prescription. Where children followed their own interests and agendas, the teachers realised the need to understand the meaning of play in children's own terms, rather than in relation to predetermined learning objectives. Thus a key pedagogical change was that play provides opportunities for teaching and learning. This was not an argument for using play solely for achieving predetermined outcomes, or privileging teachers' rather than children's intentions. Rather, the teachers recognised the importance of understanding children's patterns of learning and interaction which could inform their pedagogy and curriculum planning. In particular, they realised that children need more time to develop sustained bouts of play, and to return to their own themes and ongoing interests. Broadhead's (2004) study of children's social and co-operative skills also reinforces the importance of allowing time for play activities (especially role-play) to develop in complexity and challenge in order to support progression in play.

MacNaughton (2000a) also highlights the importance of evidence-based research in informing professional change. Using a feminist post-structural stance, MacNaughton challenged the theoretical hegemony of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood curricula specifically relating to gendered preferences in play activities and gendered patterns of play. In an action research study with Australian teachers, it became evident that many teaching practices, as well as free play activities, influenced the gendering and stereotyping of children's identities. For example, boys and girls took an active part in the construction of gender: they regularly chose to play in different areas, and they controlled the space they used in different ways. These practices were challenged and changed through a process of collaborative professional development, resulting in practical guidance on reconceptualising early childhood pedagogies in relation to considerations about equality. In a similar study with teachers

in a kindergarten in the United States, Blaise (2005) examined the ways in which young children understand gender discourses and access them in order to construct and regulate gender in their everyday lives. Play activities provided particularly powerful contexts in which children could express or contest gender discourses and roles. Their choices and play preferences were related to the ways in which they positioned themselves in terms of relative power, and the power-effects of those choices. These studies revealed possibilities for new readings of children's identities and cultures and for a deeper understanding of knowledge-power relations between children, and between children and adults. Looking at play through these theoretical lenses demonstrates that play is not simply the child's world, but reflects children's understanding and interpretations of the complex social and cultural worlds they inhabit.

Making role-play real

In spite of the many positive endorsements for play, the benefits are not universally shared across all children, and play is not always a natural or spontaneous activity in children's home and community cultures. In 2006–7 I led an action research study in a large urban primary school in Wales, with a focus on developing a whole-school approach to play, building on the Foundation Phase and ensuring continuity through to Key Stage 2. The school community was very diverse: 87% of the children came from minority ethnic groups, ranging from established second- and third-generation British Asian families, to newly arrived economic migrants from Eastern Europe, and refugees from countries virtually destroyed by civil wars and natural disasters. Around 30 community languages were spoken in the school, with language support assistants working alongside learning support assistants and teachers. In the two Year 1 classes (age 5–6) the team decided to focus on improving the quality of role-play. They were concerned about progression in children's social and communicative skills, particularly for children with English as an additional language. The adults were observing solitary and parallel play, rather than social and co-operative play, with little imaginative interaction, and little evidence of the development of sustained imaginative play. They questioned whether the children were progressing in their play, and whether the role-play provision was appropriate for the children's interests and home/community experiences. The team decided on the theme of the role-play area, with links to the learning outcomes in the curriculum, and put a great deal of energy into planning and preparing resources, and setting up the area ready for the children to use. They also planned related activities to stimulate play (for example by creating a 'garden centre', providing real plants, seeds and related equipment, and modelling buying and selling activities).

Observations were undertaken of children using the role-play area, followed by research conversations within the team, and with myself as co-researcher. I also carried out joint observations with the teachers, which enabled us to talk through events, problems and dilemmas as they arose. The garden centre theme proved to be less successful than the teachers had hoped, although the children did enjoy the

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tactile play in the wet soil, for planting seeds and filling containers. Children showed little interest in buying and selling activities, or in further developing the theme. The potential for co-operative play depended on the abilities (especially in language and communication) and dispositions of the players. Good language and imagination were observed in child-initiated play where children developed their own interests and agendas. The quieter children were sometimes pushed out of the role-play area by those who were more domineering, which narrowed the potential for the more skilled children to act as co-players. By reflecting on their observations, and discussing possible alternative approaches, the team focused on how they might make role-play more 'real', drawing on children's home- and community-based knowledge and experiences. They decided on the following actions as a result of their research:

- 1 Children should be allowed to move the role-play in their own direction rather than focusing solely on how the teachers initially planned the area to be used.
- 2 Adults can act as co-players to model skills with less confident children, especially in communication and language.
- 3 Making role-play more 'real' to the children involves taking account of their interests, and home and community experiences. The stimulus for role-play needs to be meaningful to the children, and located in the community so that a visit could take place prior to setting up the role-play area.
- 4 In order to create more meaningful play, children should be involved in planning and developing the role-play areas.

Challenging the concept of the 'universal child'

Further research conversations with the Foundation Phase team revealed their concerns about the different starting points of the children, which reflected their prior experiences, home values and cultures, varied child-rearing practices, parents' orientations to the education system, and their expectations of schooling. In addition, their theoretical knowledge of child development did not serve them well in such a culturally diverse community, and they sought the help of parents and the language support assistants in developing more culturally situated understandings of home and community practices. One teacher remarked that many children starting in the nursery at age 3 were 'under the radar' of the learning objectives in the Foundation Phase. For some children, the freedom and flexibility enshrined in a 'free play/free choice' environment was unfamiliar and difficult to negotiate without support and guidance from the adults. This research underlines the importance of challenging dominant views of the 'universal child', looking more closely at cultural differences and orientations to play, and considering the culturally constituted child (Kuschnier, 2007).

Although the findings from EPPE and REPEY reinforce the educational aims for play, the emphasis is on 'freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities' and 'planned and purposeful play', which raises a number of questions and potential dilemmas. As Kuschnier (2007) argues, teachers and practitioners strive to constrain and manage the unpredictability of play that is truly free, and aim instead to engineer children's play

choices, activities and behaviours in ways that promote educational outcomes. Thus they are working constantly with pedagogical challenges and dilemmas. For example, how do practitioners maintain a balance between intentional and responsive planning? This question becomes more pertinent in the Reception year (age 4–5) and beyond as there are competing imperatives from other curriculum priorities (notably achieving targets in literacy and numeracy). Which children take responsibility for planning, how do they go about this, and whose interests and needs lead or dominate play? If play is to be purposeful, then whose purposes are privileged, and whose purposes are being served: those of the child, the practitioner or the curriculum?

The foregoing studies indicate that a more secure pedagogy of play needs to be based on detailed theoretical understanding of cultural differences and variations in home-based child-rearing practices, and in orientations to schooling. In addition, practitioners need a more critical understanding of the meaning of play activities to children, the cultural reproduction of power relations in society, the scaffolding strategies embedded in child–child and adult–child interactions, and how the curriculum can be planned in order to combine teacher-directed and child-initiated activities. These integrated approaches require high levels of pedagogical knowledge and skills, flexibility in curriculum planning and the ability to use evidence from observation to inform cycles of planning, assessment and evaluation. Further conceptual advances can be facilitated through sociocultural and activity theories, which propose that play is a social practice and is situated in communities of practice. Learning is socially mediated and constructed as children participate in shared and distributed practices that are based on combining their everyday ‘real-world’ knowledge with play knowledge. Play activities may facilitate transfer of knowledge across different contexts, with the distinction that play occurs in imagined situations. Players become part of a discourse community in which meanings, intentions and activities are communicated through mediating means: imagined situations, tools, symbolic actions, scripts, roles and rules.

Play activities create transformational possibilities: children can reproduce and go beyond what is given. They transform ideas, materials, resources, media, actions and behaviour from one thing into something else, thereby creating novel meanings, interpretations and combinations. As children learn to negotiate different communities of practice, play provides a bridge between the possible (for example, acting as competent readers and writers) and the actual (being readers and writers). Play provides varied contexts in home and preschool settings for acquiring literacy and numeracy skills as well as acting out the social roles associated with those practices (Roskos and Christie, 2000; Worthington and Carruthers, 2003). Those social roles include media and information technologies and the varied ways in which children use these in their homes and communities (Marsh, 2005; Yelland, 2007). Playful uses of cultural tools and symbol systems are of immediate benefit to the child and provide an essential foundation for more ‘formal’ learning. The following vignette was recorded by advisory teacher Sheena Wright as part of a professional development module on play. It illustrates some of these theoretical issues, specifically a teacher’s pedagogical framing of a role-play activity, the children’s co-constructions of events and their use of cultural tools and symbols.

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Fire station play

In a Year 1 class (age 5–6), the role-play area was a fire station, and was designed collaboratively by the children and the teacher. The children visited a fire station, and learnt about ‘watches’ – the rotating pattern of shifts for the firefighters. The role-play resources included:

Wellington boots, wet play clothes, walkie-talkies, two telephones, whiteboards, musical instruments, uniforms and helmets, fire engine, keyboard, tables and chairs, plastic bottles, selection of tools, torches, tubing and hoses, ladder, flashing blue light, wall charts showing rosters for the ‘watches’, coils of rope, notepads, tape recorded messages, large bricks, large notice board covered in children’s paintings of fire engines, signs and symbols (for example, *Keep Clear, Emergency Exit, Fire Station, No Entry, Fire and Rescue Services*).

Extracts from the observation:

Number 98 – there’s a fire down town.

What do we have to do today? [*using walkie-talkie to ask chief*]

See if the road is busy.

[*Playing the triangle and bells to alert to the fire. Writing on the whiteboards*]

Number two fire. House number two.

Yes but what street?

This is officer Bradley. Fire. Fire.

There’s a baby locked upstairs.

Ssssss [*putting fire out*]

I’ll get it ...

Fire’s gone. I’ve saved the house ...

[*Back in the control centre the chief is reporting*]

OK, a robber has blown up the house.

We definitely need to go.

Go go go. We have to put our fire coats on ‘cos we’re the ones going in.

And a safety hat. [*selects one with a visor*]

Boss, am I late?

We need you on a job.

I need a safety thing [*harness*] so I don’t fall over.

[*Fire bell ringing again*]

Dog stuck up a tree.

Job’s not for me – I go at night times. I’m blue watch.

You need your oxygen so you can breathe.

[*Chief writing on the whiteboard*]

I can do a hundred sentences.

This episode reveals knowledge-in-use in a community of practice, with imaginary elements and symbolic exchanges. Shared meanings and identities are embedded within the play script and are dependent on the inter-subjective attunements of the players. The children draw on real-world knowledge about fire-fighting, gleaned from popular culture – the children’s cartoon *Fireman Sam* and the (adult) television drama series *London’s Burning*. This is combined with their play knowledge, showing new configurations and transformations in a co-constructed social context.

Broadhead (2004) provides further support for the efficacy of play in children’s social development and cooperation. Her study investigated the language and interactions children use when being social and cooperative with peers in play contexts. The focus was on child-initiated, contextually situated activities rather than teacher–pupil interactions. Many of the recorded play episodes provided examples of social, emotional and intellectual challenge, with opportunities for building sequences of reciprocal action that were often initiated and sustained by the children. They used a wide range of skills in order to operate sociably and cooperatively, and to develop increasing complexity in their play:

- initiating and sustaining verbal interactions;
- initiating and responding to non-verbal interactions;
- interpretation of others’ actions;
- problem-framing and problem-solving with different materials;
- successful entering of ongoing play;
- selecting and operating an appropriate role or degree of involvement;
- developing a shared sense of direction and goal orientation;
- empathising

Affordances for learning

The foregoing studies demonstrate how play activities create different ‘affordances’ for learning. The concept of affordances relates to the perceived and actual properties of objects and artefacts which determine their possible uses, including how they are understood and used by the learner, what challenges they present and what forms of participation are enabled by their use (Carr, 2000a). Such affordances are situated in how the play/learning environment is planned, the materials and resources that are available, what use is made of these by the children and the children’s investment of existing knowledge, expertise and skills. Play resources and activities have different affordances and potential for flexibility, especially where children have the freedom to make their own novel combinations and transformations. Yelland (2007) argues that new technologies have brought additional dimensions and affordances to familiar objects and activities; for example dolls that can communicate their emotions, computer games that enable children to create and interact with characters and scripts, and art and design programmes that enable children to combine their own drawings with pre-made features, and to record and present their creations. Children do not always need resources and games to stimulate their play, but can spontaneously enter

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a state of playfulness. Playing with knowledge, words and ideas can be seen as a form of 'instant play'. The following vignettes were recorded in research conversations with children during a study of progression and continuity, and show subversive elements of children's playfulness, particularly their playful challenges to dominant power relations (Wood, 2001).

Word play

(Nicky [age 4.5 years] spent over an hour sorting buttons, using different criteria. She talked about sorting into pairs, and invited the adult to make pairs of buttons. Nicky joked about pairs of buttons, and pears that you eat. At the end of the session, she extended this word play further with the researcher).

Researcher: I remember you telling me something about pairs – you said there were pairs of buttons. Can you remember telling me that?

Nicky: Ya.

Researcher: What did you tell me? What's a pair?

Nicky: It's not an apple!

Nicky's joke involved communicating her understanding of the synonym pears/pairs, while at the same time playing with pears/pairs as 'not apples'. Nicky's knowledge was sufficiently secure that it could be played with, and she may have been playfully resisting adult questioning by not giving the expected or correct answer.

Playing with knowledge

(Liam [age 6] was a playful child who often changed [or subverted] the teacher's intentions for an activity):

Researcher: Liam, can you tell me some words that rhyme?

Liam: Hey diddle diddle the cat and the [*hesitates and changes word purposely*] middle. [laughs] ... And the fish went over the moon.

Both vignettes show the children's minds at play: like Nicky, Liam subverted the adult's expectations, an action that could be interpreted as 'naughty' or as imaginative and creative.

These vignettes show that play is varied and complex. From the perspective of sociocultural and activity theories, play needs to be understood in terms of relationships between individuals, their actions and interactions, the meanings they construct

and communicate, and the contexts in which play occurs. In terms of the bigger picture of continuing play scholarship, the concluding section argues that developing a pedagogy of play is dependent on a more critical understanding of diversity within play activities, the characteristics of effective pedagogy in early childhood and, in particular, the role of the adult.

Future directions

The foregoing discussion has outlined positive validations, in policy, theory and practice, for developing a pedagogy of play. At the same time, play remains vulnerable to the top-down influences of prescriptive policy directives. So what further progress is needed for developing a more secure pedagogy of play? Vygotsky (1978) warned against the pedantic intellectualisation of play, but at the same time argued that only a profound internal analysis makes it possible to determine its role in young children's development. Contemporary play scholarship is providing the theoretical and methodological frameworks to facilitate such analyses, focusing on a range of contexts as well as the wider social and cultural influences on play. However, in order to develop more critical understanding of the cultural implications of play, greater emphasis needs to be placed on cultural repertoires of practice in homes, communities and educational settings.

Sociocultural theories provide a bridge between fundamentally cognitive and fundamentally social accounts of learning (Schoenfeld, 1999). At an individual level learning is interpretive, recursive and incremental, based on children constructing new knowledge and capacities on existing foundations. Learning is also socially centred and involves dynamic interrelationships between adults and children through joint involvement and social co-participation. Learning and development are channelled through sociocultural activity in which teachers and learners are interdependent. In play contexts the child may be the more (or differently) knowledgeable other, and may provide scaffolding strategies for peers. Play can be seen as a social practice that is distributed across a range of contexts and co-participants, and is influenced by the tools and symbol systems of community cultures, and the affordances that are situated within play/learning environments. Thus multiple perspectives are needed in future studies to examine the interactions between the child as player/learner and the child in the playing/learning contexts. Children are enculturated into play by adults and peers; indeed parents and family members tend to be the child's first co-players and provide a 'home-based' pedagogy of play. Further research might usefully explore home-based pedagogies and child-rearing practices, including what forms of play are encouraged and supported, and how these articulate with cultures of playing and learning in early childhood settings.

In contemporary curricula, there is broad international consensus that the subject disciplines offer powerful means for framing children's learning, as evidenced in the studies reviewed in this chapter. Children's interests are often driven by their fascination with the world of adults, and their motivation to act more knowledgeably and more competently. Future play scholarship should aim to provide empirical understanding of

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what counts as play in early childhood settings, and how different forms of play have implications for developing discipline-based knowledge, skills and understanding. Research in the field of play and literacy has been conducted from multiple perspectives, and has generated strong evidence of links between developing literacies and play activities (Marsh, 2005; Roskos and Christie, 2000). Similarly detailed and robust studies are needed across the subject disciplines in order to provide an evidence base that can inform policy and practice. Another significant gap in research is knowledge about how play progresses, how children's learning progresses through play within and beyond early childhood. Theories about progression in play also need to take account of the culturally constituted child, and the cultural conditions for learning and development in different contexts. These issues remain pressing in view of the need to improve transitions, continuity and progression across phases of schooling, and to ensure that practices are informed by the social justice agenda inscribed in *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2004a, 2004b) and other policy documents across the UK.

Finally, one of the key themes to emerge from recent studies is the importance of professional knowledge and expertise in early childhood specialists. Teachers and practitioners have a strategic role in planning for play, using playful pedagogical approaches in adult- and child-initiated activities, and engaging with children on their terms and with respect for their meanings. Such pedagogical strategies create the conditions for combining intended learning outcomes with the possible outcomes that emerge from children's interests, engagement and participation. More empirical work is needed on the pedagogical knowledge and expertise that underpins these processes, particularly in relation to influencing policy developments and the design of professional development programmes for early childhood specialists. The twenty-first century holds much promise for developing a pedagogy of play that respects the ideological tradition, and provides a theoretically rigorous underpinning for creating unity between playing, learning and teaching. Finally, lifelong playing needs to be considered as inseparable from lifelong learning. We need to re-value our relationship with play as an essential dimension of human activity across the life-course, and as an infinite source of possibilities for learning and development.

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