

# PLAYFUL TEACHING AND LEARNING

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# Why Playful Teaching and Learning?

*Glenda Walsh*

## Chapter Overview



This chapter will take you on an evidence-based journey to show you why play in practice needs to be reconceptualised. To ensure that 3–8 year old children learn more effectively in setting-based contexts, we need to think differently about play and what it means for learning – and that is the purpose of this first chapter. Before embarking on the substance of the chapter, take time to read the introductory case study as it presents the essence of what the chapter is about.

## Case Study 1.1: Lillyfield Primary School's Playtime



Like every morning, Mrs B got the children around her and began to recite the different play areas that were available for the children to play with that morning. “Today, boys and girls, you have the house corner, but I don’t want to see the same silliness as yesterday – no bringing in the dough or water – you can pretend to wash the dishes and to make cakes – sure that is what it is all about”. She then continued to

*(Continued)*

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*(Continued)*

explain where else the children could play including small world dinosaur play, construction using Lego, making birthday cakes with the dough and the writing corner where today children were having the opportunity to make Mother's Day cards. After approximately 20 minutes sitting and waiting, the 26 children were finally released to go and play in the area to which they had been assigned. Bertie and Bob were at the dinosaurs - the area they had been waiting for all week - six dinosaurs of different shapes and sizes set inside a shoe box, filled with some leaves. The boys started off making roaring sounds and then bouncing the dinosaurs in the shoebox as if they were ready to attack. The play soon developed into a dinosaur fight, becoming raucous and noisy. At first Mrs B tried to ignore what they were doing, but soon realised that she would have to intervene by asking the boys to play more quietly or she would have to move them elsewhere. In an attempt to bring them back on task, she asked them to name each dinosaur in turn and then to count how many there were. After she moved on, the boys returned to their loud and somewhat aggressive and chaotic play, but after 5 minutes they then decided to move to the dough table, where they rolled out a circle shape and stuck a candle on the top. Mrs B then called them over to the writing table to make a Mother's Day card, with the help of Miss F (the classroom assistant), as there was only 5 minutes until tidy up time.

This is the story of playtime at Lillyfield primary school. Although the observation took place some years ago (in 2010), the story is still very relevant today in many of our early years settings. Play *is* taking place and, as early years educationalists, we should be delighted about this; but in many cases the play lacks richness, challenge and adventure. In many of our educational settings, play has become reduced to routine and mundane practical tasks, where educators appear confused and lack understanding about what their role in play should be in an effort to foster learning and indeed what play as learning should look like in practice. In this chapter I intend to examine more carefully why many early years educators face these dilemmas and then create a rationale for why play in practice needs to be reconceptualised as pedagogy – moving away from an overly maturistic and child-led approach to play towards aligning play, learning and teaching more closely and proposing the concept of Playful Teaching and Learning as the way forward.

## Origins of Play as Learning

The importance of play for young children's learning and development has long been recognised, emanating from the pioneering work of eminent scholars and philanthropists such as Rousseau, Fröbel and Pestalozzi. From as early as the eighteenth century, play has been deemed as highly serious and of deep significance for children. It has been promoted as the medium through which young children learn best and through which the 'whole' child is fully developed. Contemporary research confirms the thinking of these early pioneers, drawing on a range of evidence that suggests that play educates emotionally, socially, cognitively and physically (e.g., Whitebread et al., 2012). The lasting social and emotional benefits of play have long been established in a number of longitudinal experimental studies (e.g., Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997). These studies demonstrate that engaging in more play-based and developmentally appropriate curricula in those formative early years of education has positive effects on children's interpersonal and negotiation strategies, on their personal relationships and community behaviour, on their ability to deal with stress and emotional issues, as well as their overall academic aspirations.

More recent evidence has also been accruing on the power of play-based activity in fostering children's dispositional and cognitive skills. Play, it appears, can provide opportunities for children to engage in self-regulation, to solve problems, to advance their motivation and concentration and to develop their independence and metacognitive powers (e.g., Walsh et al., 2006). A further small but growing body of evidence links play directly to children's ability to master academic skills such as literacy and numeracy. For example, researchers have found that engagement in dramatic play and acting out stories prompted their metalinguistic ability, helping children to recognise the components of stories and improve their text comprehension (Christie and Roskos, 2006). Likewise, evidence would suggest that children's early experimentation, observation and comparison in their play impacts on children's later learning of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) (Bergen, 2009). With regard specifically to mathematics, research by Carruthers and Worthington (2006) has highlighted that play involving counting and other basic mathematical operations supports young children's ability to engage in formal mathematics more confidently.

The physicality associated with play-based activity has also received growing significance in terms of children's health, well-being (Hope et al., 2007) and cognitive development (Pellegrini and Holmes, 2006). Jarvis' findings (2010) (focusing particularly on rough and tumble play) reveal that much social and gender role development is mediated through physical

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play experiences, while a literature review by Campbell and Hesbeth (2007) proposes a link between physical activity beginning in early childhood and the prevention of obesity in later years.

In this way, it could be argued that play, in its highest form, can provide for the holistic development of the young child in its widest sense, that is, socially, emotionally, cognitively and physically.

### Pause for Thought

The evidence described above emphasises the many benefits of play in practice for young children's learning and development. Why, in your opinion, can play be such a powerful learning medium for young children?

## Challenges of Play as Learning in Practice

Against this understanding of play being beneficial for young children's learning and development, is a portrayal of play in practice that is highly controversial and problematic (Hunter and Walsh, 2014; Wood, 2014). Substantial research evidence across the globe has presented a picture of play in practice as largely superficial, lacking depth and challenge, where practitioners appear to lack the skills and competence to ensure effective play-as-learning in practice (Hunter and Walsh, 2014). The quality of the provision, the role of the adult, parental expectations, and top-down pressures are some of the reasons why play in practice is perceived principally as an accessory to the learning experience, rather than the medium through which young children learn best. In many cases, play is considered little more than a means of settling children into the school day before the real work begins.

As a result, it would seem that children's play has been declining both in terms of quantity and quality over recent years. Children's ability to engage in high level play, according to Bodrova (2008), is less well developed than it should be for their age. She argues that even 5–6 year old children often display signs of immature play, typical of much younger children, where their powers of imagination are limited and the scenarios they create are quite stereotypical in perspective. The research findings from a small-scale study on the reality of play in Northern Ireland primary schools reveals a similar picture. Although the observations suggest that at least play is taking place in the early years of primary schooling (called

Foundation Stage classes in Northern Ireland for 4–6 year old children), higher levels of challenge and extension were not immediately guaranteed. It appears that complex and sophisticated play as a medium to develop children's intellectual skills and creativity was not fully understood by the practitioners involved (Hunter and Walsh, 2014).

More rigorous supporting evidence has emerged from an extensive longitudinal evaluation of a play-based intervention, known as the Early Years Enriched Curriculum (Walsh et al., 2010). Despite the increased benefits associated with the play-based approach in terms of the children's socio-emotional and dispositional aspects of learning, when compared to a more traditional and formal approach, the findings regarding their more cognitive and intellectual behaviours such as problem solving, logical reasoning and creativity, were less positive. These findings signal a warning that simply providing more play-based activities does not necessarily promote children's cognitive and metacognitive processes (Walsh et al., 2010).

Further perusal of the evidence base suggests that some teachers adopt an overly maturistic approach to play in practice, an issue that Liz Sproule will develop more fully in Chapter 2 entitled 'Mental Models of Playful Practice: Digging Deeper'. Some early years educators seem reluctant to interfere with children's play space due to a pre-conceived child-centred notion that is normally associated with Piagetian perspectives on child development. According to this viewpoint, the role of the adult is perceived principally as facilitative, where children are believed to be active agents of their own learning and construct meaning for themselves with little outside intervention (Walsh et al., 2010). As scholars such as Grieshaber (2008) argue, many play-based experiences have now become associated with *laissez-faire* teaching, with an over-emphasis on developmental perspectives with educators waiting for children to grow up and learn on their own.

Drawing on such an evidence-base it could be argued that early years practitioners appear much more comfortable when promoting the social and emotional aspects of children's learning within play, but, when it comes to the more academic aspects of learning, the findings suggest that reconciling play with educational values is a much more complex task for early years educators (Walsh and Gardner, 2006; McInness et al., 2011; Hunter and Walsh, 2014). As Fisher et al. (2010) emphasise, many early years educators have come to believe that play and academic learning are at polar extremes and fundamentally incompatible, where they must either choose to engage in direct instruction to ensure intellectual gains or let children play to enable their holistic development.

But the question is: how can we ensure a closer alignment between play and learning without subordinating play to policy directives and making it

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compliant with a narrow set of educational goals and targets? Recently there has been an uneasiness expressed about the over-emphasis being placed on formal methods of teaching in early years education to address the more academic aspects of learning. In particular, concerns have been voiced about the over-emphasis being placed on a schoolification model of practice, where the main focus of early years education is becoming associated with getting children ready for formal school (Fisher et al., 2010; Russo, 2012). As Whitebread and Bingham maintain:

The model of 'readiness for school' is attractive to governments as it seemingly delivers children into primary school ready to conform to classroom procedures and even able to perform basic reading and writing skills. However, from a pedagogical perspective this approach fuels an increasingly dominant notion of education as 'transmission and reproduction', and of early childhood as preparation for school rather than for life. (2011: 2–3)

Yet to deprive children of academic content knowledge and skills in the so-called 'knowledge age' that we live in would be highly detrimental for their overall learning and development (Fisher et al., 2010). In addition, to argue that play has no place in the enhancement of children's academic learning would be misinformed and would run counter to the underpinning principles of play scholarship in its entirety (Hunter and Wash, 2014). The time is ripe, therefore, to challenge this disjuncture between play and education and to place renewed emphasis on reconceptualising play as a form of pedagogy in practice, where the adult takes a more active role in the playful experience. As Russo (2012) maintains, "the challenge for teachers is to find the appropriate balance between academic engagement and academic challenge, while providing a learning environment that encourages and supports exploration and discovery without the stress of competition, standardization and testing" (2012: 10) – the essence of what this book is about.

### Pause for Thought

In your opinion, why might play and academic learning appear incompatible?

What needs to be done to ensure a closer alignment between play and learning in practice?

What challenges might you face in the process?



## Reconceptualising Play as Pedagogy

In an effort to help early years educators to resolve some of these dilemmas in practice, there is a growing evidence base that is beginning to create bridges between ideas and to open up conceptual boundaries that were previously thought to be impenetrable, that is, aligning play and play-related activities more closely with a proactive and intentional pedagogy, where playing, learning and teaching are becoming more fully synchronised (Wood, 2013). There is growing acceptance that allowing children to make their own meanings through play does not mean that teachers abandon their responsibility to teach (Brooker, 2010). Such thinking, it could be argued, originated in the findings of the project known as Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004), as part of their major longitudinal EPPE (Effective Provision for Pre-school Education) study in England and EPPNI in Northern Ireland. From case studies that were carried out in preschool settings in England, Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) concluded that the most effective teachers/practitioners:

- engaged children in interactions that showed sustained shared thinking;
- showed a good understanding of the content of curriculum areas;
- encouraged children to engage with cognitive challenge;
- had a repertoire of pedagogical activity (including direct instruction) that they drew on as appropriate;
- differentiated the curriculum to match activities and level of challenge to the children's needs;
- showed an equal balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated activities; and
- had clear behaviour and discipline policies, supported by facilitating children to talk through conflicts, which benefited social skills.

From their extensive analyses of adult/child pedagogical interactions in the pre-school settings, they deduced that the most effective preschool settings (in terms of intellectual, social, and dispositional outcomes) achieved 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. In addition, they argue that the best practitioners use a mixture of pedagogical approaches – for example, scaffolding, extending, discussing, monitoring and direct instruction – to fit both the concept or skill and the developmental zone of the children. They also highlight the importance of “sustained shared thinking”, where adults and

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children work together “to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend a narrative.” (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004: 718)

More recent work by Hedges et al. (2011) in New Zealand also draws attention to the proactive pedagogical strategies the teacher can employ in children’s play. Drawing on a qualitative study in two early childhood settings, their findings suggest that practitioners need to look beyond the tradition of well-resourced, child-centred, play-based environments, to engage more fully with children’s own interests and the already-acquired knowledge that children bring from home to enable a richer extension of children’s learning. In this way they are calling for teachers to be conscious of how young children learn and develop, but simultaneously keep in mind the concepts that they as teachers wish young children to learn and understand (Hedges and Cullen, 2012). Such thinking resonates with the work of Pramling-Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson (2008) on the “playing learning child” which argues that teachers need to be both child-centred but also directed towards learning objectives simultaneously.

The significance of this more proactive and intentional play pedagogy on children’s learning has been clearly evidenced within the Tools of the Mind programme in the USA (Bodrova, 2008). In this programme, teachers are specifically encouraged to help children use toys and props in a symbolic way; for example, rather than using a toy telephone, encouraging children to represent the telephone with an object such as a rectangular block, which bears only the most superficial resemblance to it. Gesture is also encouraged to stand for action. Activities are designed to develop extended play scenarios, to discuss roles and to plan future scenarios, called ‘play plans’. Although the activities in the Tools of the Mind programme involve teachers to a greater extent than is generally expected for role play, Bodrova points out that their involvement should last only for a short time; the children should quickly learn how to build their own roles and rules, and then require much less support. Comparing the Tools of the Mind programme with a more traditional early years curriculum, Barnett et al. (2008) found that this more systematic pedagogical approach to play improved overall classroom quality and children’s executive functioning. The programme, in this case, also had some positive effects on the children’s language (though these effects did not reach statistical significance).

This renewed emphasis on championing the role of the teacher in children’s play portrays a distinct shift in conceptual framing beyond the confines of Piaget’s developmental ages and stages approach towards Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian notions of socio-culturalism and participatory learning theories. Through appropriate interaction with adults and more knowledgeable peers, children’s learning, it appears, can be nudged

forward in new directions that may not be possible by waiting for children to develop at their own pace. However, it is important to note that such ‘pushing’ is not to be conceived as an “acceleration of development”, that is, a push down of inappropriate instruction and activities (Grieshaber, 2008: 6). Instead, by actively participating with children in a playful manner, teachers can encourage children to explore and construct new knowledge, skills and understanding, opening up genuine learning opportunities. In so doing, “buds of development” (Vygotsky, 1978: 86) will blossom.

### Pause for Thought

Why is the role of the teacher so important in the play experience?  
 What, in your opinion, makes the difference between a practitioner who interacts appropriately in children’s play to extend learning as opposed to one who does not?

## Towards Playful Teaching and Learning

It is from this theoretical perspective and evidence base that the concept of ‘Playful Teaching and Learning’ emerges. Interpreting the pedagogical lessons learned from the Early Years Enriched Curriculum evaluation, Walsh et al. (2011) point towards a new integrated early years pedagogy known as ‘playful structure’ which promotes playful teaching and learning in practice. Playful structure invites teachers and children to initiate and maintain a degree of playfulness in the learning experience, while at the same time maintaining a degree of structure to ensure that effective learning takes place. The idea of play becomes a characteristic of the interaction between the adult and the child and not just a characteristic of child-initiated versus adult-initiated activities. In this way it is thought the interaction adopts playful characteristics; for example, the tone is light-hearted, the activity becomes self-sustaining because both partners are enjoying it, and unexpected turns and directions are allowed.

Such thinking builds on the recent work of Howard and McInness (2013) who associate children’s feelings of playfulness with increased performance. They argue that it is the internal and affective qualities of play such as motivation, enthusiasm, and willingness that make it so vital for development, rather than the act of play itself. Consequently, they believe that it is the practitioners’ responsibility to tune into “children’s cues and so enable

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them to take a playful approach and attitude to activities” (Howard and McInness, 2013: 48). That said, it is important to emphasise that the infusion of playfulness is not perceived as mere frivolity, simply donning a childish and immature persona and trying to make learning silly and fun. Instead, the concept of playful teaching and learning conjures up an experience, an interaction, a relationship and ethos between children and adults which results in motivation, enthusiasm, engagement, trial and error and thinking outside the box.

Enriched Curriculum teachers who provided the highest quality teaching and learning experiences were able to infuse such playfulness into a learning situation without it appearing contrived, allowing children to try out new ideas without fear of failure. They made use of an array of tools and pedagogical approaches – using role play, drama, stories, puppets, the outdoors, problem-solving, popular culture, topics, questions, ideas and suggestions. All classroom activity, not only free play, assumed playful characteristics. Read the following case study and consider how it illustrates such thinking in practice:

### Case Study 1.2: The Magic Wand

The teacher is giving a lesson on partitioning sets to a group of children aged six years. The six children have all been given a set circle and a set of five objects. The teacher, wearing a wizard’s hat, employs a ‘magic wand’ wooden spoon to demonstrate partitioning the set. She says, “Here’s my magic wand. Watch carefully!”. She brings the spoon back over her head and moves it forward saying dramatically, “Magic wand, magic wand, split the set”, as she splits the objects into two sets. She demonstrates this twice more, including “splitting the set a different way”. The children are encouraged to use their own magic wands to split the set for themselves and then move on to describing in words what they have done. Finally, they are offered a choice of recording what they have done in words or in informal numerical style.

In addition, evidence suggests that an important role of the playful teacher is to interact with the children when appropriate, structuring the task if required or simply observing, listening and tuning into what is taking place in order to ensure effective learning is taking place in practice

(see Walsh et al., 2010). Playful teachers require a sound knowledge and understanding about how young children learn and develop but are also capable of letting down their guard and playing alongside the children and (on occasions) following their lead, encouraging creativity, imagination, spontaneity and ambiguity in the learning experience. In this way the playful experience might be something as simple as encouraging children to paint pictures with milk or white chocolate, searching for money in a basin of Coco Pops, creating a castle from an array of cardboard boxes or imagining that you are one of Santa's little helpers and helping to create a factory line of toys. In these examples cross-curricular skills are being fostered in abundance but in a playful and engaging manner. The following case study helps to showcase how a teacher can drip-feed learning into a playful experience. Consider the learning that is being fostered in the following case study:

### Case Study 1.3: A Re-enactment of Daisy Hill Farm



Having visited Daisy Hill Farm the previous Friday, the 3-4 year old children at Meadow Green nursery school were enthralled to learn on Monday morning that they were going to set up their own farm in the nursery. Using a planning board, they explored ideas about what they would want to call their farm, what they would want to see there and what they would want to do there. The children were full of ideas from milking cows, driving the tractor to baking their own bread in the farmhouse oven. Mrs Harmony was delighted with their ideas and set to task finding materials and resources to ensure that the children's interests were built upon, but at the same time that her overarching learning intentions, focusing on "people who help us" - in this case "the farmer" and the story of milk - were fully met. On Tuesday morning, when the children arrived into class, the nursery was transformed. Daisy the cow was waiting to be milked with glove attached, the water in the water tray was now white and several different sized bottles were waiting to be filled and brought to the nearby farm shop. In the junk area, large cardboard boxes were waiting for children's eager hands to be transformed into some form of farm machinery and the smell of flour, margarine and sugar filled the air as Mrs Harmony awaited the children's help to get some soda bread in the oven.

## Key Messages

In this chapter we learned that:

- High-quality play has many benefits for young children's learning and development.
- The play that we see in practice, in many cases, is low key and mundane, offering little opportunity for cognitive challenge.
- Many practitioners appear confused about what their role in play should be and undervalue the potential of play as learning in practice.
- An integrated early years pedagogy, known as Playful Teaching and Learning (PTL) has been proposed as the way forward.
- PTL honours the interests and autonomy of young children and accommodates new thinking about the role of adults in scaffolding and co-constructing children's learning, in order to move beyond the confines of play and academic learning as separate entities.
- Infusing playfulness into the teaching and learning experiences is perceived as a novel way of bridging previously held dichotomies between formal and informal, work and play, child-initiated and adult-led activities in early years classrooms.
- PTL can provide the appropriate balance between enabling young children to be autonomous and creative while ensuring genuine progression in children's cognitive skills and content knowledge.

## Further Reading

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