

# Play-based Learning in the Primary School

Mary Briggs and Alice Hansen



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# INTRODUCTION

In the UK and many other countries around the world there are a growing number of primary schools developing their pedagogical approach to the curriculum so that the children receive a broad, balanced curriculum that encourages high achievement and engagement. The development includes the use of 'creative' and 'innovative' approaches to learning and teaching that put children and their needs at the centre. This book addresses many of the issues related to this pedagogic approach by focusing on play-based learning and teaching across the primary and elementary school.

The book begins by presenting a number of biological, societal, educational and developmental views of play. These address the social/cultural, behavioural/physical, affective/emotional and cognitive/intellectual aspects of play. We also present the 'planning paradox' in relation to play which is one of the main issues related to a play-based approach to learning and teaching. The planning paradox states that there is a tension for teachers between the desire for children to feel a play-like freedom within more formal school-based learning, but that this is unsatisfactory if the child's and teacher's agenda differ. This book addresses this significant issue.

The book centres on a number of principles of play. We know that every school context and every child's need within that context is different. Therefore we use guiding principles that work in all types of play regardless of the situation. The principles are introduced in Chapter 2 as roles for older learners. We use the premise that children have the capacity to be autonomous learners, creative learners, investigators, problem solvers, reflective learners and social learners.



Building on the earlier chapters that outline what play for older children is and the roles that older children undertake within play, Chapter 3 identifies the types of play that are suitable for 5–11-year-olds. These are:

- artistic or design play
- controlled imaginary play/social dramatic play
- exploratory play
- games play
- integrated play
- play using the whole school environment and beyond
- replication play
- small world play
- role play
- virtual play.

Play-based approaches to learning are synonymous with the early years phase of education, yet this chapter uses research to demonstrate how each type of play can effectively address older learners' needs including their academic attainment. Each type of play is illustrated with a small practical idea.

Chapter 4 draws together the principles and types of play by providing full case studies from primary schools in England where play-based approaches to learning are being utilised. It is our intention that the case studies will act as a catalyst for you to try play-based approaches in your teaching and will also illustrate the principles and types of play outlined in earlier chapters.

The planning paradox is revisited in Chapter 5. The tension that it identifies is critically discussed, with a focus on the role of teachers and other adults in a play-based approach to learning and teaching. We look at different models for play-based learning environments and the possible roles for adults and children within these. Practical advice for involving adults and finding other adults to help is given.

In Chapter 6 we look at the issues around planning for play activities with 5–11-year-old children and how both adults and children can be involved in the planning and organisation of play environments. It includes discussion of the design and planning of environments, as well as the development of environments through spontaneous events in the classroom and outside as a response to children's interests and their ideas. This chapter raises questions about how we stimulate play with older learners and how we allow the element of choice within activities for the children.

In a play-based approach to learning and teaching, assessment methods and strategies are different to the more traditional approaches often used. In Chapter 7 we address a number of significant issues that teachers often face in relation to assessing during a play-based approach. Aspects such as process vs. product, output vs. outcomes, and hard vs. soft outcomes are considered. We challenge existing widespread practice to ask who can undertake the assessment and look at the role children have in assessing their own achievements.

We also look at a range of assessment methods that move away from traditional paper-based evidence and encourage you to try some of them. We take observation, a key assessment strategy used in the early years, and consider its application in settings for older children. Finally, we consider reporting assessment findings to parents.

Inclusion is the availability of opportunity for *all* learners to make progress learn from activities through the removal of any barriers to learning and development. These may be physical, emotional, social, cultural, religious or cognitive. In Chapter 8 we consider how all children can be offered a rich and enjoyable experience that will support their development in the widest sense. We use speaking and listening as a tool for being a reflective and social learner. We look at issues that are more particular to children who have English as an additional language and more widely the social issues that impact on all members of a school community.

Finally, Chapter 9 discusses how play-based approaches to learning and teaching can support children's transition from primary to secondary schooling. It provides a case study of how a primary and secondary school collaborate with a view to supporting the learners in both settings in a range of transitions (for example, from primary to secondary school and from secondary school into a career). Issues about using a skills-based curriculum, the impact of children's levels of confidence on ease of transition, and links between primary and secondary school experiences are explored.

Overall the book supports teachers and trainee teachers in thinking about why and how a play-based approach to learning is effective in the whole primary school. It considers a wide range of school contexts, and offers innovative and practical advice for how a play-based approach to learning can be implemented as a school-wide approach or in a single classroom.

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## CHAPTER 1

# WHAT IS PLAY IN THE PRIMARY OR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL?

### Introduction

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It is widely accepted within educational literature that play is a difficult notion to define.

Play is a complex phenomenon that occurs naturally for most children; they move through the various stages of play development and are able to add complexity, imagination, and creativity to their thought processes and actions. (Mastrangelo, 2009: 34)

Because of the nature of play, we do not offer a precise definition. Instead, in this chapter we present a range of views of play, including biological, historical, societal, educational and developmental in order to support you to develop your own understanding of play in the primary school.



#### Points for reflection

Before reading on, think about the play that you engaged with as a child and adolescent, and engage with now as an adult. As you read each section below, reflect on how your own play could be seen from a biological, historical, societal, educational and developmental view.

## Biological views of play

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Much research identifies that play is a necessary condition for some birds, reptiles, and all mammals including high-order animals such as primates (see, for example, Elkonin, 2005; Oliveira et al., 2010; Palagi et al., 2004; Liu, 2008). It appears to be generally accepted that, from a biological perspective, play is imitative in nature and is a necessary condition for survival in the species. For example, play fighting is observed in rodents (Pellis and Iwaniuk, 2004) and for primates, social play and grooming encourage extended periods of social cohesion (Palagi et al. 2004). Birds also exhibit social behaviour in play, from chasing to reciprocal object play (Diamond and Bond, 2003). Although play is mostly observed in the young of animal species, play is present in adulthood too (Palagi et al., 2006).

From this literature it is possible to conclude that for animals 'play behaviour is far from ... a purposeless activity' (Palagi et al., 2004: 949), but is this the case for humans? Craine (2010) seems to think it must be. He explains how children in very challenging circumstances (such as waiting in emergency hospital rooms, living during the Holocaust, or living in ghettos) play spontaneously and uncontrollably. They often have little to play with and face pain, hunger or uncertainty, yet they use whatever they have to play creatively. He proposes that this desire to play may be an innate part of being human. Other animals only play if they are happy and fulfilled (Palagi et al., 2004), yet Craine suggests otherwise for humans. Therefore, if playing is such a strong innate human response, how has society's and education's view of it developed through history?

## Historical views of play

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### Societal views of play

Play is an issue that has been explored by many writers over the previous two centuries who have established alternative perspectives on its role and usefulness. There are writers who have seen play as not holding any real value but purely as a means of using up children's excess energy, for example, Spencer in 1898. Therefore play from such perspectives was not seen as a medium for learning. Others, such as Groos (1890), decided that play allowed children to prepare for life by providing opportunities for the practice of skills and offering the possibility of exploring ways of learning what they will need to know as adults, though having potential excess energy to burn in engaging in the activities was an advantage but not a necessity. For those like Hall (1908) looking at play from an anthropological perspective, play allows children to act out all the primitive behaviours of our evolutionary past, for example, play fighting is reminiscent of the wrestling activities highly visible in past societies and cultures. These writers clearly see play as associated with learning but very specific kinds of knowledge is being learnt. The focus is on practising existing knowledge

within society which is linked to cultural heritage and roles within occupations. It could be argued that his view of play is stagnating in our changing society where the skills and knowledge are shifting and we do not necessarily need the existing skill sets that children can learn from watching adults at work or in roles in the home. Those following the principles of Maria Montessori would still see this practice of the skills of everyday life as important, not only for practical life but also to help children develop the concentration and co-ordination of mind and body. This view of learning continues to be popular across the world.

## **Educational views of play**

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### **The impact of the National Curriculum**

In primary school the place of play has shifted over time from the 1960s and 70s. This was influenced by Plowden (CACE, 1967) and during that time experiential learning environments could be seen in all classes up to and including Year 6. This continued into the 1980s before the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989, when there was a move away from projects or thematic approaches to curriculum planning. The next three decades saw the rise of subjects as the dominant approach for organising learning. The 1990s and first decade of the new century were dominated by the National Strategy's approaches to planning, teaching and learning.

Perhaps it is the way we conceptualise learning that is part of the problem. We are bounded by notions of curriculum which stem from the separation of subjects and learning into compartments both in time and space. Teachers often struggle to make the connections between these artificial separations and as a consequence learners make their own arbitrary connections which can lead to the establishment of misconceptions and lack of understanding.

Learning and teaching are often assumed to 'take place' in particular slots of a timetable in particular classrooms associated with particular curriculum subjects. (Loveless and Thacker, 2005: 4)

The need to demonstrate results of policies and a nostalgic view of a past education system that worked because of its traditional methods and rigour has led to politicians appearing to be austere. This is demonstrated in the following extract, which suggests that children are in schools to work and not to have fun.

Ministers have presided over the death of fun and play in the primary school curriculum, according to the results of an inquiry published today. (Garner, 2007)

However, there were significant consequences across primary schools of moving away from play-based activities. Christine Gilbert, the chair of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group, stated that 'too many children



drift into underachievement and disengagement and fail to make progress in their learning' (2006: 12).

This is a particularly saddening indictment of the state of education at the beginning of the 21st Century by Christine Gilbert, who became Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in that same year. After all, children start in education with an enthusiasm for learning through their natural curiosity about the world around them. They are keen to learn with inquisitive minds, yet the system appears to force them into learning the skills, knowledge and especially the facts that will help them to pass the assessments, particularly the exams, in order to make the grade. Our education system appears to have failed many children for whom learning is no longer a fun activity but a tedious means to an end.

## Making amends

The introduction of *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfE, 2003) began the reversal of the subject-led trend and reintroduced notions of cross-curricular links and aspects of creativity. Alongside this the personalised learning agenda was introduced to try to address disaffection and lack of engagement. Schools worked with these changes in different ways. One Bristol school which implemented a creative curriculum found that giving their learners greater choice in their curriculum:

- raised children's motivation levels, in particular for home learning;
- helped children become more engaged with their learning in lessons; and
- enhanced teachers' motivation by encouraging them to get to grips with completely new 'topics'. (Haydon, 2008)

## Developmental views of play and learning

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This book positions play activities within a new paradigm for the future for learners in the primary school. This paradigm is introduced in Chapter 2. However, there is an extensive literature which includes writers viewing play in different ways and it is useful to review a few of the works of authors who have explicitly linked play to learning in different ways.

In summary, the majority of these writers see play as a vehicle for learning whether that be the therapeutic, practising of existing skills or developing symbolic thinking. See Table 1.1.

Among a majority of contemporary researchers, writers and commentators it is widely accepted that play is essential for younger children's learning, yet as children get older there is a shift in the emphasis given to play. Views differ about the role of play around the age group on which it should be focused; for example, Strandell sees play as

an activity that separates children from the real, adult world. It has become one of the expressions for the banishment of children to the margins of society. Play has become an expression of a kind of activity that has no place in real society; something easy that children engage in while waiting for entrance into society. (2000: 147)

Play is sometimes seen as something special for children as they are different from adults. As a consequence play, according to Pellegrini and Boyd, has become 'an almost hallowed concept for teachers of young children' (1993: 105). For Ailwood (2003) there are three dominant discourses of play which she identifies as:

- 1 *A romantic/nostalgic discourse*. Ailwood suggests that the romantic/nostalgic discourse attempts to look back to a time when children had more freedom to play outside without adult intervention. There is a view that all children had access to this kind of environment whereas the reality is that this was not uniformly available. This view of play is also based within the dominance of Western culture where play is highly valued for children's emotional well-being. This is supported by the work discussed above where play is seen as something all adults have enjoyed and is viewed through rose-coloured glasses as idyllic. What this discourse fails to recognise are the difficult issues that children encounter when playing, such as lack of friends, disagreements with friends, bullying, issues surrounding toys and sharing or just having nowhere to play.
- 2 *A play characteristic discourse* which is linked to the first discourse and despite some variations in practice is commonly taken as the starting point for many writers about children's play. These characteristics have some consistencies in their description but one of the most well known comes from Tina Bruce:

*The 12 features of play*

- 1 Using first-hand experiences
- 2 Making up rules
- 3 Making props
- 4 Choosing to play
- 5 Rehearsing the future
- 6 Pretending
- 7 Playing alone
- 8 Playing together
- 9 Having a personal agenda
- 10 Being deeply involved
- 11 Trying out recent learning
- 12 Co-ordinating ideas, feelings and relationships for free flow play. (2001: 117)

- 3 *A developmental discourse* (Ailwood, 2003: 288) which is linked to cognitive psychology and focuses on Piaget and Vygotskian views of learning outlined in Table 1.1. This is promoted through children having opportunities for dialogues about their learning which are available in 'play situations'.

A child’s play is not simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired. (Vygotsky, 2004: 11)

For Vygotsky play provides an important context for learning and development: ‘Only theories maintaining that a child does not have to satisfy the basic requirements of life, but can live in search of pleasure, could possibly suggest that a child’s world is a play world’ (1933: 1). But: ‘The child moves forward essentially through play activity. Only in this sense can play be termed a leading activity that determines the child’s development.’ Of key importance here is the dialogue through which children can articulate their developing ideas and adults can interact to navigate them through the mine field of potential misconceptions and social interaction issues.

**Table 1.1** Overview of key theorists and their views of learning and play

Key theorist	View of learning	View of play
Freud (1975); Erikson (1950); Winnicott (1971); Issacs (1929)	Psychoanalytic perspective	Play is a cathartic experience for children enabling the emotional and cognitive growth of children in a safe environment.
Piaget (1999); Bruner et al. (1976)	Constructivist perspective	Play is a product of assimilation. During play, children practise skills to move towards mastery and try out new combinations of behaviour in a safe setting. High value play leads to intellectual development.
Vygotsky (1978)	Social cultural perspective	Play is a vehicle for social interaction and is the leading source of development in the pre-school years. Play develops symbolic thinking by facilitating the separation of thought from objects and actions. Vygotsky questioned whether or not the child is truly free in play, as the play situation actually sets the limits on behaviour. Through language and symbolic thought, play involves self-regulatory behaviour that involves children developing the ability to plan, monitor and reflect upon their own behaviour.

**Play as a precursor to formal learning**

Most writers see play as making the transition to more structured learning. In this extract from Siraj-Blatchford’s (2009) table of a model of pedagogic progression in play the final category focuses on this transition rather than seeing play as a continuous part of lifelong learning.