

Play and Pedagogy - contested concepts in policy and practice

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The early childhood community has always advocated the value of play in children's learning and development, often invoking the work of Rousseau, Froebel, Montessori, Isaacs, Piaget, and others, as the foundational canon of knowledge in ECE.

However, I argue that this canon has become inadequate to the task of justifying play in contemporary contexts: changes in policy, in family life, in play and in education have necessitated evidence-based justifications for why play is valuable, what and who it is valuable for, and how its benefits can best be realised in education settings.

The task of justifying play now reflects the policy focus on economic and educational effectiveness in ECE, with a shift towards instrumental orientations to play in national policy frameworks.



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In England we are witnessing increasing interventions of the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) in matters of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and play (Wood, 2019). These trends mark the move from light to heavy touch ECE policies in which discourses of school readiness are privileged, based on children achieving defined outcomes (Kay, 2019), and the transition to 'formal' learning in a content-driven Key Stage 1 curriculum.

Policy-practice tensions

Not surprisingly, play has run into a barrage of problems because ideological faith in the intrinsic value of play is an inadequate response to policy drivers such as outcomes, quality, standards, and school readiness. As a result, OfSTED (2015) tells practitioners what play is, and what approved pedagogical approaches they expect to see during inspections (Wood, 2019). OfSTED uses familiar discourses of child-initiated and adult-directed

play, but sets clear expectations that approved approaches to play will align with policy drivers. The discourse of 'planned and purposeful play' implies that teachers' planning and purposes are privileged over children's interests, meanings and intentions. The value of child-led and freely-chosen play is compromised by policy recommendations, despite a substantial body of research highlights the varied roles that adults have in children's play. So what (if anything) can be done, and what alternative possibilities offer potential for sustaining expansive goals for children's learning?

Children's interests and working theories

Contemporary research indicates that children's interests are the springboards for deep enquiries that may be sustained over time in their play-based peer cultures (Chesworth, 2018). Children develop their own rituals and practices, but at the

same time incorporate meaningful content within co-constructed webs of learning, thinking, reasoning, problem-solving, pretending and imagining. Interests thus become the conceptual arena in which children express complex ideas, drawing on the cultural resources, materials and technologies from their homes, communities and school experiences. Interests are not just activity choices, but enable children to build working theories (Hedges, 2018) which have important cognitive and affective content. Hill (2015) identified children's working theories as being related to

- human nature: *self identity; beliefs, values, religion; rights and responsibilities; relationships; life and death*
- the social world: *the structures of human society- families, communities; organizations in society such as schools and workplaces; the roles people play in these organisations*
- the physical and natural world: *the physical and biological world; scientific laws and principles; the animal and plant kingdoms*

The work of Hill and Wood (2019), Chesworth (2018) and Hedges (2018) agrees that paying close attention to play reveals the outcomes of children's interests and enquiries are knowledge exchange and knowledge building as they incorporate everyday and scientific knowledge and understanding, moral reasoning, and an ethical concern for relationships. Hedges (2018: 2) also argues that curriculum built on children's interests



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might strengthen children's motivation, effort, memory and attention. In addition, learning interests could become one legitimate and authentic vehicle by which to incorporate intentionally the academic content that is also prized in many curricular approaches in ECE and in formal schooling.

Children's digital play also offers multiple opportunities for shared interests. Marsh (2017) describes the connections that flow between

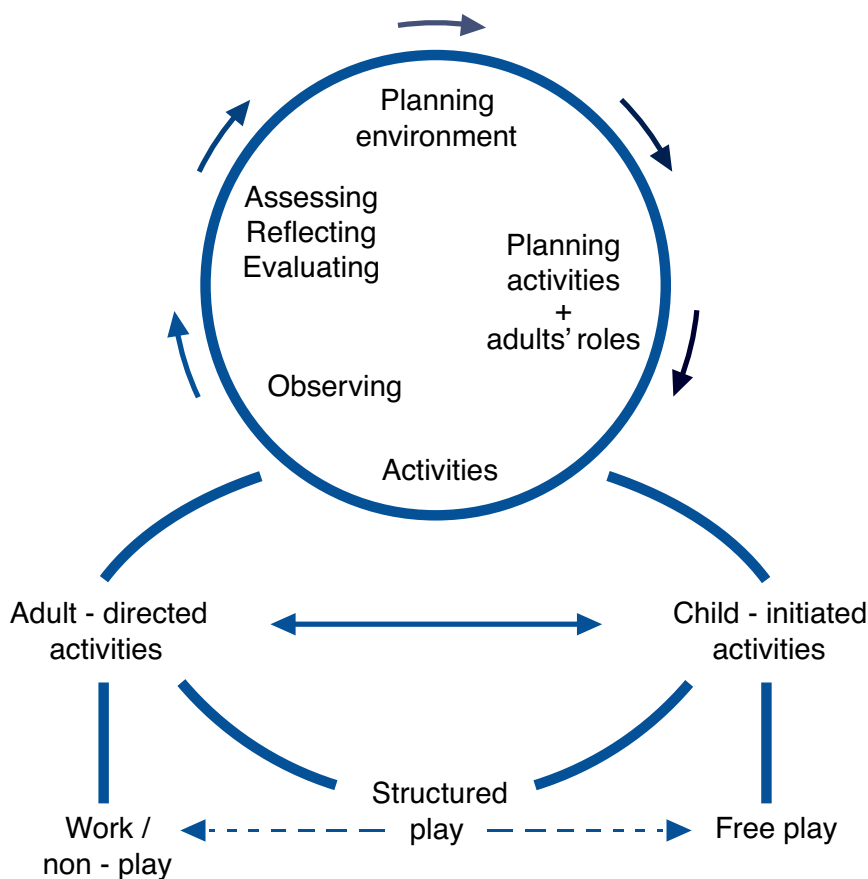
children's literacy and play practices with digital technologies, media and popular culture, including diverse texts and artefacts ranging from clothing, household goods and food to mobile phones and accessories, internet sites and virtual worlds. From this perspective there is no distinction between digital and 'traditional' play, because these modes are increasingly blended or converged. Children's interests are embedded in digital technologies, as reflected in their uptake, potential for

learning, social engagement and the development of imaginative play.

These recommendations are not easy to implement. Children's learning in free play is not linear or progressive in the ways that are valued in current curriculum frameworks, therefore their play-based interests and working theories may not have direct relevance to defined curriculum goals or learning outcomes. Where goals or outcomes are narrow, or tightly framed, teachers have fewer opportunities to pay attention to, let alone respond to the cognitive, social and affective content of their play as collective interests and resources for learning. So what are the implications for pedagogy, and how can practitioners avoid the limitations of 'planned and purposeful play'?

Wood (2010) proposes a model of integrated pedagogical approaches (Fig 1) to conceptualise the relationship between adult-led and child-led activities within the overall cycle of curriculum planning, observing, assessing and reflecting. This model shows a dynamic relationship between adult-led activities and child-led play activities, in that both can inform curriculum planning. In the right side of the model, play is determined by children's freedom to choose materials, activities, spaces and places to play, and who they play with. On the left side of the model, adult-led activities can introduce new content, build on identified interests and working theories, and enable children to see the connections

Fig 1 : A model of integrated pedagogical approaches



and flow across planned and freely-chosen activities. This model does not undervalue adult-led activities as a means of introducing or building on children's conceptual knowledge, skills, understanding and ongoing enquiries. However, curriculum is co-constructed dynamically in the setting, with children having many opportunities to use and apply their knowledge in imaginary and everyday contexts.

This model is equally valuable for Key Stages 1 and 2, especially as children integrate their digital play into everyday activities. For example, I observed 9-10 year old children using Lego and stop motion animation to create, talk about, write and present stories, showing high levels of competence and motivation in their multimodal literacy skills, as well as their imagination, organization, social and co-operative abilities.

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In summary, the model of integrated pedagogical approaches:

- reflects international research evidence,
- offers guidance for supporting children's learning within and beyond the curriculum areas,
- sustains broad rather than narrow outcomes
- integrates children's creative use of digital technologies
- supports progression in play beyond the early years.

There is much uncertainty about the place and future of play in education settings. However, play is not merely a staging post to formal learning in Key Stage 1. The concepts of children's interests and working theories, combined with this model, offer practitioners a range of pedagogical possibilities that reflect the potential of play for children's learning.

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Pen Portrait

Dr Elizabeth Wood is Professor of Education at the University of Sheffield. Her current research spans projects on children's play in a multi diverse ECE setting; teachers' understanding of converged play; and a comparative study of educational leadership

in ECE in England and Australia. She has written extensively about play in books, academic and practitioner journals, and has recently written a critique of the Ofsted 'research' report 'Teaching and play: a balancing act' (Ofsted, 2015) for *Education 3-13*.

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