Play within the National Curriculum

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This paper explores the place and value of play within the National Curriculum, considering the outcomes of two major reviews of the primary curriculum. In addition, a week long study in one primary classroom using play as a means for teaching phonics influenced a change to teaching and assessing within the school setting and both supports and contradicts some of the recommendations of curriculum review. The paper concludes that play is a valuable tool for teaching and learning.

Keywords: play, symbolic play, national curriculum, curriculum review, child development

The definition and function of play

The child’s right to play is recognised in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989) and play is described by Paley (2004, p.8) as ‘… mankind’s oldest and best used learning tool’. “Play” itself is difficult to define as it rarely occurs in isolation; it happens throughout aspects of many activities. McCune (1998, p.601) states that play can be defined by common indicators such as ‘the presence of joy and absence of purpose’. The Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) (2008) classifies its own meaning of play; they describe ‘free’ play as an internally motivated, personally directed behaviour that is chosen freely by the child. The child learns and develops as an individual through play and explores the world, themselves and responds to challenges encountered. Such play is active and mind-absorbing, pleasurable and fun. Children should have the opportunity to play with others as well as themselves. The CWDC (2008) also acknowledge that adults can, through the provision of a suitable environment, significantly increase opportunities for the child to play creatively and develop through ‘structured’ play. In fact, Reggio Emilio and Montessori approaches to education regard that adult intervention only serves to enhance learning through collaborative and sensory play.

It is my view that most authentic play experiences are those freely chosen and initiated by the child. However I do acknowledge that the term ‘free play’ is a misnomer, as all play experiences are to a large extent structured by the individuals involved and the resources available. Play is very important in the learning and emotional development of all children. CWDC (2008) state:
‘... through play, children create their own themes, test ideas, solve problems, learn to see the other’s points of view, use language, develop muscle coordination, explore their environment, and make discoveries.’

Play’s most important function is that it aids children to develop physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively.

These are skills that compliment the Every Child Matters (DCSF, 2004) outcomes for young people and children, which aim for every child to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. The CDWC (2008) state the function of play as ‘how children experience fun and joy’. They suggest that through appropriate play children can develop a positive sense of self, and achieve their potential and experience success.

Play allows children to use their imaginations and be creative; children learn to manage their emotions, develop values and ethics, learn to develop relationships and improve their social skills through play. Children can also develop their fine and gross motor skills, develop skills for thinking, reasoning and problem-solving and build on the foundations for learning such as language and reading to help them make sense of the world. Many theorists agree that play has a purpose and function in child development: Tinbergen (1963) notes that play can motivate us to repeat newly acquired skills and helps to strengthen neurological structures; Odem et al, (2004, cited in Papatheodorou and Moyles, 2009, p.46) suggest that a child exhibiting engagement and active participation in a play activity without coercion will be intrinsically motivated to develop their learning further.

Although both Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978, cited in Parker et al, 2009) have differing views regarding children’s maturity and cognitive development, they both recognise the important role of play. Vygotsky (1978, cited in Wood and Bennett, 1998) particularly acknowledges symbolic play. Symbolic play is when a child substitutes one inanimate object for another, such as a box becoming a castle or a hairbrush becoming a microphone. Vygotsky’s social-constructivist ideology argues that joint learning through discussion, reflection and sharing knowledge can enrich children's play experiences and plays a key role in children's learning. Hurst (1991, p.57) appears to be in agreement with this view:

‘Young children learn in contact with other people, whether parents, teachers or peers; the quality of relationships is crucial in provision for them.’

Vygotsky recognised that whatever the age of the child, some of their needs are only fulfilled by play. Piaget’s constructivist theory suggests that pleasure is obtained internally from the child’s own sense of mastery through play. There are in my school many opportunities for children to explore, through play, mathematical and scientific concepts, reading, writing and story telling, constructional materials, religious and historical artefacts. Children can develop fine and gross motor skills through activities such as painting, cutting, gluing and other malleable play such as dough and model making and using large apparatus in outdoor play such as den building. Jigsaws, board games, building blocks, threading beads, play dough, dressing up clothes, puppets and persona dolls are, in my experience, valuable play resources.
Through construction and fantasy play, children learn to experiment and manipulate language, emotions, concepts and environment (Child Development Institute, 2000). Physical or manipulative play allows children to develop both their individual gross and fine motor skills. Children learn social rules by interacting with others in social and co-operative play and learn skills such as reciprocity and sharing.

**Play in the National Curriculum**

If play is recognised by so many as having value and function in children’s development and learning, then why are educators often reluctant to include play in the curriculum? Play has been undervalued as a curricular tool by educators and parents alike; many parents underestimate the value of play and perceive academic learning to happen through formal approaches.

Hall and Abbott (1991, p.2), state that

‘Play, being something that apparently does not have to be worked at, is deemed less valuable by society than those activities which have outcomes that are susceptible to educational evaluation’

Anning (2009) claims that, historically, politicians and decision makers within the education system deemed play as frivolous and a low-status activity. The only acceptable play took place in competitive team games. In fact many educators also used play as a means to “occupy” less able children or as a reward for finishing work. Anning (2009) suggests that when practitioners make a distinction between ‘real work’ and play, it only compounds the view that practical activities are low status and unimportant. She suggests that due to a more prescribed, formal and structured curriculum, children in Key Stage 1 are now being offered fewer practical experiences and opportunities to learn through play, as it is sidelined in favour of meeting curricular or standard assessment expectations. In fact society in general de-values play as Hall and Abbott (1991, p.3) state:

‘...once children start schooling most parents consider that “real” learning has to start and the apparently inconsequential behaviours associated with play must, fairly quickly, be replaced by work.’

A study into the use of play by Bennett et al (1997) suggests that play experiences alone do not enable the child to develop into becoming an independent learner. They found that even though children were observed as being ‘hands on’ and appeared to be playing in the way the teacher had expected, they were in fact not intellectually engaged. Anning (2009 p.23) negates this finding and states ‘the concept of the intelligent hand is not part of our cultural heritage’ and Blenkin and Kelly (1983, cited in Kingett, 1995) suggest that playful pursuits should be seen as effective methodology to promote learning.

Pascal (1996, p.142) argues that

‘...as soon as children begin to explore and respond to the world and the people around them, then a curriculum is in existence, be it formal or informal, explicit or implicit, articulated or just experienced.’
I believe giving children the opportunity to go on a personal adventure and explore in well-structured and active learning environments helps children to gain knowledge and understanding of the world around them. As Anning (2009, p.26) states:

‘If the curriculum was genuinely designed around children’s learning needs, perhaps then we would encourage a generation of children with a love of learning ...’

Curriculum Changes

Although play is recognised as vital in the early years setting, it is often a very much underestimated and undervalued resource for older children. Recently, The Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2009) has recommended delaying formal lessons until after a child turns six, to allow them to focus on play-based learning. It notes that other countries do not start academic lessons until children are six or seven, and most overtake England in performance at some point as the children grow older. Siraj-Blatchford (foreword in Papatheodorou and Moyle, 2009) found that the only country in the United Kingdom to currently extend the child’s right to play is Wales, which under the Welsh Framework for the Foundation Phase allows children between the ages of 3 to 7 to have access to a curriculum that is play centred both in and outside of the classroom.

Interestingly, following Rose's Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum (2009), it was suggested that the government planned to bring forward the school starting age from five to four from September 2011. This decision to lower school entry age at first seems to contradict the findings of the Cambridge Primary Review, (Alexander, 2009); however the report does call for a smoother transition between nursery and primary school, to ease the move from play-based to formal schooling. Formal schooling is typically very structured, teacher-led, subject specific and limits peer-peer interactions.

The Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum (Rose, 2009) recommends that the government should replace some traditional lessons in primary schools with new "areas of learning” and should focus on a cross-curricular and a thematic approach to learning. The six new areas of learning for schools to focus on are: understanding English, communication and languages; mathematical understanding; scientific and technological understanding; human, social and environmental understanding; understanding physical health and well-being; understanding the arts and design. Rose states: ‘Learning play in the early years isn't at odds with learning more formally, in a more structured way. You need both.’

I do question why we keep making changes to the curriculum. I agree with Rose who claims that the curriculum will change because society changes. We are moving in an ever increasing technological world and we cannot possibly predict the skills that will be needed for future generations. However basic life skills which can be learned by rehearsing and developing competency through the medium of play are vital to the Every Child Matters agenda for developing future citizens. These skills should be nurtured and not overlooked in favour of more academic subjects but should complement each other.
In a week-long focus, I looked at ways of incorporating play-based phonological learning into literacy lessons. I set up several independent activities that could either be child initiated or adult-directed. The purpose was to reinforce and consolidate the teaching and learning of grapheme and phoneme corresponding knowledge through multi-sensory play activities. The children were immersed in phonic-based activities such as role-play, fishing for phonics, finding phonemes and objects and playing sound bingo. Other activities included cutting and collage, malleable letter formation with pipe-cleaners, play dough and letter threading etc. The children also experienced writing with paint, chalk, pens, pencils, crayons, goop and writing in sand. Using DCSF (2007) Letters and Sounds: Phase 2 assessment pack, children were assessed prior to the intervention and then again at the end of the week. All children were found to have improved their phonic and grapheme recognition of the letters S-A-T-P-I-N.

Conclusion

Within each of the two major reviews of the primary curriculum, play has gained more significant value, especially in the under-8’s curriculum. The Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum (Rose, 2009) proposes that there should be more emphasis on a community-based curriculum which would allow teachers to develop more autonomy in the classroom and would enable schools to respond to opportunities and needs within the local community. Under these changes the purposeful function of play is recognised as an effective educational tool. It is accepted that children of all ages develop cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically through play. Children will be exposed to more opportunities to learn through play.

Within my own school, justifications that engaging in what appear to be low-status, recreational activities can in fact actually provide an educational experience for all children have influenced a greater thematic continuum from the Foundation stage across into Key Stage 1. My study demonstrated that children were engaged and motivated with their own learning through play. I noted that the children self-differentiated activities according to their own abilities. I found play an effective tool for enriching the thinking of children and it provided them with an opportunity to create, invent, and reason and problem-solve. As a result of my intervention more play opportunities are now extended to children within Key Stage 1. The intention is to use observations of children engaged in play activities to assist in documenting and Assessing Pupil Progress (APP). Drummond (1996) argues that rather than being constrained by the statute of core subjects, attainment targets and level descriptors within the national curriculum we can still choose to document and evidence children’s learning through play thus giving validation and a principled case for play.

Children are individuals and vary greatly in their academic development and readiness for formal learning. Drummond (1996) also argues that we should place value on what children do when they play rather than the achievement or attainments that we can specifically identify. She states

‘...we can justify children’s play in terms of what it means for the learning, for their doing and feeling and understanding.’ (p. 138)
I conclude that if children feel that their own play experiences are meaningful and worthwhile, then I would argue that there is therefore value to play.

References


