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**Discovering Play**

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If an educational consultant rang you at school to tell you about an evidence based programme that would support your children to perform at levels a year or more beyond usual expectations for their chronological age, you might be interested. If the consultant said the programme gives children intrinsic motivation to learn and children love it, you might be *really* interested. If the consultant added that the programme would cost your school nothing because it needs no expensive specialist resources and no additional adult support, you may want to trial it.

I bring good news! There is such a programme and it is available free to your school now. Its name may be familiar: the programme is called ‘play’.

In this article, I discuss how play can support children’s learning and I share ways that children in the Young Children as Researchers (YCAR) project used play to build and demonstrate their geographical knowledge and understanding (Murray, 2017).

**Why Play?**

If ‘children develop as a result of their playing’, play may be a valuable learning tool (Gray, 2013; Sutton-Smith, 1997: 12). Play motivates children to explore, discover and solve problems. It inspires them to build and share knowledge with others, gives them mastery of their own learning and allows children to develop social and emotional skills (Johnson and Dinger, 2012). Play is ‘the way in which young human beings learn (and) a major avenue through which children learn to be happy, mentally healthy human beings’ (Cannella, 2002: 124). It is both a condition for learning and a medium for learning and it has the potential to support primary children’s thinking, reasoning and understanding (Fromberg and Bergen, 2006; Goswami and Bryant, 2007).

Play can secure learning, but all too often children arrive at school to find that learning is not play (Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008). Schools tend to disregard play, preferring to disseminate knowledge to children and test their recall (Kohn, 2011). This model has its roots in C17th thinking: ‘…liberty and indulgence can do no good to children: their want of judgement makes them stand in need of restraint and discipline’ (Locke, 1692: s.40). It positions learners as deficient and passive and the teacher as omniscient knowledge dispenser (Hirsch, 1988). It is not a model likely to cultivate learning and innovation skills for C21st living including critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity, whereas play may do so (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2007; Boyer, 1997)

**Why Not Play?**

Given good evidence suggesting links between play and learning (Goswami and Bryant, 2007; Kernan, 2012; Whitebread, Basilio, Kuvalja and Verma, 2012), it may seem irrational for schools to disregard play as a pedagogic tool. However, play is not accepted universally as a force for good. Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) suggest that play may perpetuate inequalities and they observe that established benefits of play based learning have increasingly been challenged by performativity agenda. Primary schools tend to focus on what teachers teach and how that is measured, which necessarily limits what children might learn. Yet the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) advocates that schools should address children’s needs, not the other way around (Schleicher, 2017).

**What is play?**

The transmission mode of schooling is often adopted because many adults do not understand play and teachers tend to find it difficult to explain how play can benefit learning so cannot justify using play for learning (Santer, Griffiths and Goodall, 2007; Wood, 2013). Moyles (2015) describes adults’ efforts to understand play as ‘trying to seize bubbles’ (p.16) and Wood (2015) acknowledges play is ‘complex…chaotic, unpredictable and transient’ (p.ix). A widely accepted definition of play in the UK is:

*‘…freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child’*

(National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) 2000).

Children’s choice, activity and autonomy are foregrounded here: play enables children to think and act in ways that are usually seen in older children (Vygotsky, 1978).

Adults’ attempts to understand play have led to numerous classifications of play. Some focus on social play (Broadhead, 2004), while Hughes (2002) identifies over twenty diverse play types. Hutt (1979) proposes three play behaviours: epistemic behaviour (exploration or problem solving leading to productive acquisition of knowledge), ludic behaviour (creating ways to use that information) and games with rules. The English EYFS establishes children’s play and exploration as one of its three Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL), alongside active learning and creating and thinking critically (DfE, 2017:10). CoEL are not requirements in the Primary National Curriculum in England (DfE, 2013), but they could be useful learning tools for children throughout the primary years.

**How can play help children to build knowledge and understanding?**

The Young Children As Researchers (YCAR) project is an ongoing participatory study that captures how children aged 4-8 years build knowledge in sophisticated ways (Murray, 2017). YCAR reveals how children initiate and implement activities that are congruent with professional adult researchers’ behaviours, and often play based. YCAR has shown how children explore, find solutions and conceptualise alongside other research behaviours to construct knowledge and understanding for themselves, frequently in play. The YCAR project did not focus on separate subjects but some of the children’s knowledge and understanding demonstrated clear links to geography and three examples are set out below.

***The Guided Tour: Gemma explores***

Gemma (aged 5) acquired knowledge and information about how to operate a camcorder, by creating her own ‘guided tour’ of her home. She focused the camcorder on features of her home as she travelled through it, examined each physical object and space, and gathered data, behaviour recognised as exploration for research (Stebbins, 2001). As Gemma encountered each physical feature, she annotated verbally: ‘Bin…Breakfast bar…Sun cream…Cooker…Spicy things (spice rack)…Sugar…These are the stairs, there’s about 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 steps.’

**Gemma engaged in both epistemic and ludic play here. She explored how she could use the camcorder and got to know how to use it (epistemic behaviour). At the same time, she mapped the physical features of her home, putting her acquired knowledge to creative use (ludic behaviour).**

**During her guided tour, Gemma talked about the features of her own immediate environment (EYFS, KUW) and she mapped the physical features of her home (Ge1/1.4c).**

***Sugar cube play: Pedro finds a solution***

One day at school, Pedro (aged 4) made an igloo from sugar cubes. Pointing to a gap in the cubes, he said ‘I’m making a(n) igloo… that’s the doorway’. Pedro’s friend then accidentally nudged the table and the igloo collapsed. Pedro began constructing again, but this time, he designed and built a sturdy tower surrounded by a protective wall.

**Here, Pedro engaged in ludic play to find a solution: he used information to create a tower: a new way to use sugar cubes, less likely to collapse than his igloo.**

**Pedro showed that he knew about similarities and differences in relation to places, objects and materials (EYFS, KUW). He also** **used basic geographical vocabulary to refer to key human features (Ge1/1.3b)**

***Planting Seeds: Querida and Sally conceptualise***

Querida (aged 4) and Sally (aged 5) were outside at school when Querida announced to a friend: ‘We found these seeds on the ground and we’re planting the seed’. They found some pots and began planting the seeds. They found two watering cans and asked the teaching assistant to help them to get water from taps indoors. Querida and Sally watered the seeds and Querida said: ‘There – they’re all watered now!’

**Querida and Sally conceptualised that the seeds could grow if they planted them in soil and watered them; they put information they had acquired to creative use, so they were engaging in ludic play.**

**Querida and Sally made observations of plants and talked about changes (EYFS, KUW) and they used basic geographical vocabulary to refer to key physical features (Ge1/1.3b)**

**Play for Learning**

Play - ‘…freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child’ (NPFA et al., 2000) - can support children’s learning in rich, yet simple ways that are compatible with statutory curriculum but are not limited by it. Children aged 4-8 years who participated in the Young Children as Researchers project engaged freely in play and other activity to build knowledge and understanding for themselves. Some of the knowledge and understanding they acquired fits the statutory EYFS and national curriculum in England, including subject requirements for geography, while some goes far beyond.

If you are interested in reading more about how children aged 4-8 years build knowledge through self-directed activity, Jane’s book explains ways children’s construct knowledge and the roles of teachers and parents and it contains many more examples of children’s knowledge building activities: ‘*Building Knowledge in Early Childhood Education: Young Children are Researchers’*.

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