

The Manipulation of Play by Society is Constraining the Power of Play to Empower- a position paper

By: Kristen Stead

Theorists have debated over a fixed definition on the concept of play for decades, without ever coming close to pinpointing an exact explanation of the complex concept. Play's multifaceted nature may create more confusion to a reader than simplifying it; as play has many characteristics, all of which are connected on either a surface or deep level. The idea, then, of trying to define play requires theorists to understand every individual characteristic in a deep interconnected way before beginning to put them together. However, the action of pulling together all the characteristics to reach that ultimate definition can be compared to that of 'trying to seize bubbles (Moyles, 1995: p5), as play's ephemeral nature disallows for any slight grasp to be securely captured. Play's transient disposition suggests an ability to be manipulated and a flexibility to suit an individual's understanding. Therefore, I, propose that play will hold different meanings to individuals (Goncu et al, 2007) and as such the concept will be manipulated by "the eyes of the beholder" (Larsen, 2015: p175). An example of how play is manipulated to suit an individual's beliefs, experiences and societal expectations can be demonstrated through the imagery of a complex maze. The numerous entrances, exits and dead-ends of a maze provide different journeys of opportunities to achieve the goal of reaching the middle. Similarly, with play, individuals will have had different opportunities and experiences with play and therefore their journey to define play will be suited to them, and thus different to that of the next person.

My definition of play has been generated through the influences of my studies and personal experiences. It places significant emphasis on knowledge that has been challenged during my degree, which may limit the concept of play but serves a particular purpose within this position paper. Within this paper, I propose that *'Play, as a concept, is too ambiguous to be expressed with absolute precision. Its vagueness provides opportunities for individuals to benefit from its therapeutic, educational, societal and pleasurable elements. Individuals should be in control of their play; an adult's role in a child's play is to empower and enable rather than lead'*.

The child experiences a new world every day and through their play they "discover this new world in their own time and at their own pace" (Elkind, 2007: p102). Hughes (Project Wild Thing, 2013: Online) comments that children can be viewed as "lone organisms on a hostile planet in the middle of nowhere" and only through play can they begin to make sense of their surroundings. Play has existed for centuries, and will continue to thrive in the future, because children are readily innovative and don't seek permission to play. However, today, many adults view it as their responsibility to 'teach' or 'educate' children so that they are prepared for adulthood. Perry (2009) suggests that for children to

become fully human, they need play, implying that play is a tool used by adults to 'educate' children for adulthood. However, I propose that children are already fully human, but through play, they are enabled to access and encounter social etiquettes and cultures which will support them throughout their childhood and into the future as adults. Lester and Russell (2008) add that play is not necessarily to prepare children to be better adults in the future, but rather, its benefits are to prepare children to be better children in their present moments; in essence play prepares you for more play (Lester & Russell, 2008).

Today child-centred pedagogy is held in higher esteem than adult-led pedagogy by many early years practitioners, as it encourages children's play and autonomy. A child-led pedagogical environment meets children's interests and builds their independence and confidence with the collaboration of practitioners, who regard themselves as resources to children's learning. This encourages the children in a setting to be more creative, innovative and out-going within their play; children can be enabled to make decisions, encouraged to voice their opinions and to respect their peers and teachers. However, Langford (2010) presents an argument for a democratic pedagogy, where children and their peers, alongside Early Year's Practitioners (EYPs) and families are at the centre. This democratic pedagogy holds value in establishing relations where everyone will develop their knowledge, judgement, power and agency (Langford, 2010); this will support children to interact in a world where they are valued as children and their play is valued.

As EYPs we have a responsibility to support children in their play. Messenger (2013: p144) comments that "if you're early years, then you're only early years", a perception that undermines the abundance of professions in the Early Years (EY) sector. Just the differences between two professions, EYP and a Play-worker, within the EYs sector has demonstrated the magnitude of versatility within EY's practice. These differences have demonstrated the various aims of the adults towards children's play and how each profession considers its role within providing holistic play opportunities for children. A play-worker can be defined as an adult who works within a specific arena to intentionally improve the opportunities for children's play by affecting the whole environment (PLAYBOARD, 1984). While an EYP is rather, traditionally, an adult who cares for children within an educational setting. Generally, play-workers tend to manipulate play with the philosophy of taking the individual child's agenda as the underpinning of their practice (Brown, 2003). While an EYP generally manipulates play to suit the educational needs and learning experiences of the child.

The underpinning ethos of a play-worker is to enable and encourage children to achieve their potential through play (Brown, 2003) with the philosophy that children are competent to make decisions about

their play (Sturrock & Else, 1998). Our responsibilities as play-workers is to develop relationships with the children, understand all their individual needs and to act as resources for their play (Sturrock & Else, 1998). Significant theories that influence play-workers' practice are that of Psycholudics (Sturrock & Else, 1998) and Compound Flexibility (Brown, 2003) as they promote child-centered-ness and the empowerment of children through play. While traditionally, EYs Nursery settings promote practice that repress play and urge educational goals and tend to take an adult-led pedagogy rather than that of child-led pedagogy. However, both professions profess to promote the holistic development of the child, but due to their differing manipulations of play, they conflict in the methods of supporting that holistic development. If the aim of play-workers and EYPs is to support children's holistic development, then all play environments should be underpinned by the agenda of the child. This ethos determines good practice in being ready and willing to provide play opportunities when called upon by the children (Brown, 2003); furthermore, these attitudes will contribute to creating a flexible environment that is accessible to all children.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) arguably sets out a very narrow view of play, with its only function being educational. Section 1.8 (DfE, 2017) highlights the importance of adult-led, planned and purposeful play to support children's learning and development. However, through understanding the ambiguity of play, its vagueness demonstrates its inability to be narrowly restricted to only being a function for children's educational development. Sturrock and Else (1998: p20) comment that there is a danger to restricting children's play aims with adults urge to "teach" or "educate" or simply to "dominate". This danger of dominating children's play could result in children being disempowered to be autonomous and an agent in their own lives. The EYFS limits its potential to encourage and support children's development by only acknowledging play's benefit in cognitive learning, and not acknowledging the benefits presented by play in children's health and well-being. If we are to support children's holistic development, then there should be no limitation put on the power of play. In our role as the adult, we need to consider that children's play is not ours to dominate or control, but rather to be a resource to facilitate children to be empowered through their play. Therefore, a synthesising of a new role we play as adults is needed. An updated model of the EY sector that evolves around play will encourage practitioners' understanding "that a lack of action need not equate to a lack of competence" (Bailey, 2017: p3). This call for renewed outlines of the professional's role in children's play, are so that practitioners are emboldened by social policy to trust the play process and its benefits.

British Government has manipulated its definition of play to only be of worth if there is a valued outcome to it. Canning (2007: p233) comments that within the UK, our social structure is "organised around rules and outcomes", supporting the response of adding adult value and outcomes on children's

play. Furthermore, Western society's market-led economy is pressurising children and young people to make an economic contribution, thus leaving out time for play (Perry, 2009). This philosophy has filtered into the development of educational policy, as seen in the EYFS, where expanding curriculums, assessments and demands of parents (Bateson & Martin, 2013), are of more importance than a child's well-being and right to play. Although there has been a pedagogical transformation from "didactic and adult-centred to exploratory and child-centred" (Papatheodorou, 2010: p146) within the last decade, the increase of assessments, shortened scheduled playtimes and regulations has stunted the potential in the pedagogical change. By reducing play to fit societies' educational expectations, we are disabling children's opportunity to maintain concentration (Bateson & Martin, 2013), develop independence and competence and therefore are promoting a counter-productive model to children's holistic development. Therefore, there needs to be an emphasis on advocating play in a renewal of the educational policies.

The realisation about the importance of play can be viewed through its impact upon children's mental health. Children a few decades ago had much more freedom to play, to experience autonomy without the pressurising societal expectations that children may have today. Within today's society "up to 25% of children show signs of mental health problems" (Public Health England, 2017: Online). Psychologist Peter Gray (2011) suggests that the rise of mental illnesses, such as anxiety, depression and suicide etc., in children, could be explained by the decline in opportunities for play experiences. A downhill spiral of children's mental health may continue if society does not acknowledge the importance of play to bringing competence, autonomy and empowerment to children and, consequently, future adults. However, as a practitioner, there is an expectation to follow policy and regulations. But as EYPs, we should be encouraging the expansion, not the restriction, of children's play, actively advocating and promoting the benefits of the play process. There is an emphasis on challenging boundaries to create environments that empower children through play, instead of just readily complying to regulations and guidelines set out by Governments. If we are advocating children's right to play (UNICEF, 1989: Article 31) then consequently, children will view their play as holistic and meaningful (Papatheodorou, 2010) rather than valueless and insignificant, which is how it may begin to be seen if society continues to ignore the possibilities of play.

In conclusion, this paper has examined the various manipulations of play. Play provides freedom from societal conventions, with the possibility to practice values but challenge boundaries, to prevent them becoming "mindless habits" (Sicart, 2014: p5). Therefore, it is vital to have a renewal of Government Policies and a new synthesised role of adults so that there is a not an environment of immobility but rather an atmosphere that acknowledges and validates the immense power of play. The power it gives children to express and discover themselves, the power it has to provoke uncomfortable feelings in

adults (Canning, 2007) and the power it has to be manipulated by individual's needs without ever losing its influence. Play's powerful ambiguity will continue to initiate mystery and contradictory emotions, but it is through this ambiguity that manipulations of play will have significance in an individual's experiences and the development of themselves.

1,981

References:

- Bailey, E. (2017) *Placing trust in Play* [Online] TACTYC. Available from: www.tactyc.org.uk/reflections [Accessed 22 November 2017]
- Bateson, P. & Martin, P. (2013) *Play, Playfulness, Creativity and Innovation* [e-book] England, Cambridge University Press. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central [Accessed 25 October 2017]
- Brown, F. (2003) Compound Flexibility: the role of playwork in child development. In: Brown, F. (ed) *Playwork: Theory and Practice* [e-book] Maidenhead, Open University Press. Available from: Dawsonera [Accessed 17 October 2017]
- Canning, N. (2007) Children's empowerment in play. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* [Online] 15 (2) 227-236. Available from: Taylor & Francis Online [Accessed 20 August 2017]
- Department for Education (2017) *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* [Online] London, Crown Copyright. Available from: https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/files/2017/03/EYFS_STATUTORY_FRAMEWORK_2017.pdf [Accessed 14 December 2017]
- Elkind, D. (2007) *The Power of Play: learning what comes naturally* [Online] Philadelphia, Da Capo Lifelong. Available from: Blackboard Digitised Chapter [Accessed 20 October 2017]
- Goncu, A. & Jain, J. & Tuermer, U. (2007) Children's play as cultural interpretation. In: Goncu, A. & Gaskins, S. (eds) *Play and development: Evolutionary, sociocultural, and functional perspectives*. Mahwah, NJ; Lawrence Erlbaum, pp.155-178.
- Gray, P. (2011) The decline of play and the rise of psychopathology in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Play*, 3, 443-463.
- Langford, R. (2010) Critiquing Child-Centred Pedagogy to Bring Children and Early Childhood Educators into the Centre of a Democratic Pedagogy. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* [Online] 11 (1) 113-127/ Available from: SAGE Journals [Accessed 24 December 2017]
- Larsen, L.J. (2015) Play and space: towards a formal definition of play. *International Journal of Play* [Online] 4 (2) 175-189. Available from: Taylor & Francis Online [Accessed 19 October 2017]
- Lester, S. & Russell, W. (2008) *Play for a change; play, policy and practice: a review of contemporary perspectives* [Online] London, National Children's Bureau. Available from: Blackboard Digitised Chapter [Accessed 3 October 2017]
- Messenger, W. (2013) Professional cultures and professional knowledge: owning, loaning and sharing. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. 21 (1) 138-149.
- Moyle, J. (1995) *The Excellence of Play*. Buckingham, Open University Press.

Papatheodorou, T. (2010) The Pedagogy of Play(ful) learning environments. In: Moyles, J. (ed) *Thinking about play: Developing a Reflective Approach*. [e-book] England, Open university Press. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central [Accessed 30 September 2017] pp.145-163.

Perry, E. (2009) *The value of play* [Online] London, Continuum. Available from: Blackboard Digitised Chapter [Accessed 27 September 2017]

Playboard (1984) *Playwork working Group* (Internal Paper) Birmingham, ACPR.

Project Wild Thing (2013) *Why do children need play – Bob Hughes* [Online] Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdcGTnNEYHo> [Accessed 24 December 2017]

Public Health England (2017) *Better Mental Health: JSNA Toolkit: Children and Young People* [Online] Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/better-mental-health-jsna-toolkit/5-children-and-young-people> [Accessed 23 December 2017]

Sicart, M. (2014) *Play Matters*. Playful Thinking Series, No. 4. [e-book] England, The MIT Press. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central [Accessed 24 September 2017]

Sturrock, G. & Else, P. (1998) 'The Colorado Paper': *The playground as therapeutic space: playwork as healthy* [Online] Sheffield, Ludemos Associations. Available from: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0By35P591tzrbYUJJRmhwYXIMbFk/view> [Accessed 6 October 2017]

UNICEF (1989) *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* [Online] Available from: https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_summary-1.pdf?_ga=2.192786346.1444829751.1514047495-1407007219.1514047495 [Accessed 23 December 2017]