Introduction

Elizabeth Wood, Pat Broadhead and Justine Howard

This book arose from an invited research colloquium held at Leeds Metropolitan University in April 2008, which was jointly organised by Professor Pat Broadhead on behalf of TACTYC, and Professor Elizabeth Wood on behalf of the Early Childhood Special Interest Group of the British Educational Research Association. The colloquium was supported by a grant from the Vicky Hurst Trust, to whom we owe our thanks. Nine researchers, all established scholars in the field of early childhood education, came together to present and discuss their research relating to play, learning and pedagogy in educational settings, along with invited early childhood specialists. The colloquium had two main aims: to explore contemporary research on children as playful learners and adults as playful pedagogues, and to set an agenda for future research into play and learning. Whilst the research studies were varied in terms of their theoretical and methodological orientations, a further aim was to consider their findings in relation to their potential for informing (and sometimes challenging) policy and practice. In addition to this book, the colloquium led to a number of outcomes, including an invitation to present the research evidence to the Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum, led by Sir Jim Rose (DCSF, 2009); a seminar at the House of Commons, where some of the colloquium's original participants disseminated the research on play; and invited meetings with key policy makers in the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Thus, the research reported in this book has already been influential in these different contexts. However, our aim (and hope) is that it will become even more influential as it is read, considered and acted on by practitioners at all stages of their professional development.

The book is well-timed, for different reasons. First, early childhood educators have fought long and hard for a curriculum that recognises the value of play to young children's learning and development. Those efforts have been productive, as evidenced in the attention given to play across the four UK countries and in international contexts. Although there are similarities in the ways in which play is valued in international early childhood curricula, there are differences in the age range that is encompassed within the term 'early childhood'. Whilst the English Foundation Stage involves children from birth to age five, the Wales Foundation Phase encompasses birth to age seven, which aligns

it more closely with that of other European countries. Second, in addition to developing policy frameworks for early childhood education, UK governments are investing in play from birth to 18, as evidenced in the policies of the national Play Councils (Play England, Play Wales, Play Scotland and Playboard Northern Ireland), and the growing field of Playwork. Third, children's rights to play are being aligned with improving the range and quality of provision for play in education and community settings. However, the policy agendas for early childhood education, and for Playwork, are driven by the expectations that play will have specific impacts such as improving children's educational outcomes; contributing to young people's health and well-being; and advancing the social justice agenda by improving access to and inclusion in play, games and sports, particularly for young people with special educational needs, those from minority ethnic communities including refugee and migrant families, travellers and gypsy communities, and socially disadvantaged groups such as homeless families (DCMS, 2004, 2006; DCSF/DCMS, 2008).

This leads to the fourth (and perhaps most important) reason for the timely publication of this book, namely that play cannot and should not be subordinated wholly to educational policy agendas that privilege narrow constructs of effectiveness and defined outcomes. Instead, the authors agree that play needs to be considered from the perspectives of the players – their motivations, meanings, intentions, imaginings and inventions, and in terms of the distinctive qualities and characteristics which mark out play from other activities, and especially from work. To achieve these aspirations, the authors have drawn on three theoretical perspectives: socio-cultural, bio-cultural and psychological, each of which provides a distinctive lens for understanding different aspects of play. Their choices reflect the ways in which contemporary play scholars have developed contrasting theoretical perspectives to conceptualise play, learning and pedagogy in early childhood, including post-colonial theories (Cannella and Viruru, 2004), post-developmental theories (Edwards and Brooker, 2010) and post-structural theories (MacNaughton, 2005)

The authors have also used contrasting methodological orientations and research designs, with a bias towards the interpretivist paradigm for eliciting the perspectives and interpretations of children, practitioners and family members. In terms of research ethics, the studies encompass contemporary concerns with respectful methods, which involve people not as 'donors of data', but as participants and as knowledgeable reporters of their social and cultural realities. This is evident in the range of research methods used, including experimental designs; photo elicitation techniques; stimulated recall via videos, diaries and artefacts;

participant and non-participant observations; and co-constructive dia-
logue with children and adults.

A further distinctive contribution of this book is that the authors do not
shy away from critical examination of some of the truth claims that
have been, and continue to be made, about play. This involves chal-
lenging universal assumptions about the efficacy of play, contesting the
ways in which play is positioned in policy documents, and questioning
long-established truths about 'free choice' and 'child-centredness' in
light of social diversity and complexity. The authors demonstrate that,
whilst the field of play scholarship remains theoretically and method-
ologically eclectic, these contrasting perspectives create new mosaics of
knowledge and understanding about play, and the ways in which
research can inform policy and practice. Thus, the claims that are being
made *for play*, the pressures that are exerted *on play*, and the expecta-
tions that different stakeholders (parents, practitioners, policy makers)
have *of play*, are considered critically in light of research evidence.

In Chapter 1, Wood explores the reasons for continuing tensions
between the rhetoric and reality of play in educational settings. In part,
this problem can be attributed to the long-established ideological claims
that have been made about the primacy of free play, free choice, auton-
omy, control and ownership, all of which are characteristics of
children's self-initiated activities. Although many of the claims that are
made for play are supported by research evidence, practitioners con-
tinue to have problems in implementing good quality play experiences,
and in demonstrating to parents and other professionals that children
are learning when they are playing, and that their learning meets (or
exceeds) the minimum standards laid down by the Early Years
Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2007). Wood proposes a model of integrated
pedagogical approaches, which includes child-initiated and adult-
directed activities, and reflects socio-cultural theories of learning, with
practitioners playing important roles in leading and responding to chil-
dren's repertoires of choice, interests and activities. These arguments are
consistent with wider international trends towards re-conceptualising
adults' roles in play (Clark, 2009; Wood, 2009).

In Chapter 2, Brooker reports her research on 4–5-year-old children in
English reception classes, and provides detailed consideration of the
influence of cultural diversity on children's orientations to pre-school
and school. This chapter provokes the question of whether play has
been over-estimated as *the* way in which children learn. Brooker
describes the mismatch of expectations that can arise between educa-
tors and ethnic minority parents about learning, and about play as a
medium for learning. The research evidence challenges assumptions

about the universal efficacy of play in relation to diversity, social justice and inclusion. Cultural diversity is not simply a matter of providing positive images, or clothes and artefacts in the role play areas, or of families sharing cultural artefacts between home and school. Researchers concerned with equity and social justice problematise the celebration of superficial differences, and argue that educators need to dig deeper to discover the funds of knowledge needed to support children's learning in culturally authentic ways (Goodwin et al., 2008: 7). Brooker's research demonstrates that the concept of integrated pedagogies should involve integration of families' cultural beliefs and childrearing practices, and the effect these have on children's repertoires of choice and participation in play.

The theme of choice and participation is continued in Chapter 3, where Broadhead reports her ongoing research into the links between play and learning in children's social and cooperative play, with children aged three to six years. Using an empirically driven observation tool, the Social Play Continuum, Broadhead demonstrates the value of joint observations with practitioners for critiquing and informing practice. Her research reveals the ways in which children link the worlds of home, pre-school and school, through their use of tools and artefacts, and develop their thematic interests for stimulating high level, cognitively challenging play. This research raises a key issue about progression and continuity: with experience, children's play becomes more complex, more varied and more skilled, but this is typically the point at which play in educational settings is curtailed. Given the policy commitments to play (as described at the beginning of this chapter), it would seem timely to address this discontinuity, and to consider how complexity and challenge can be enhanced beyond early childhood.

In the following two chapters, Jarvis and Tovey address aspects of play provision that continue to provoke controversy, and to challenge practitioners' beliefs and practices. In Chapter 4, Jarvis reports her research into rough and tumble play, and its function as a basis from which children create pretend play and games with rules. Taking a bio-cultural theoretical perspective, Jarvis explores the gendered nature of rough and tumble play within both single and mixed gender episodes, and, in common with Broadhead, reveals the social complexity within the children's narratives and experiences. This study challenges practitioners to deconstruct the prevalent 'zero-tolerance' approach to rough and tumble play, to consider the ways in which players teach each other the rules and routines of their own play cultures, and to pay more attention to the ways in which gender differences in play are manifest in their settings.

One of the reasons for the zero-tolerance approach to rough and tumble play is, of course, the concern for children's safety and minimisation of risk. However, as Tovey argues in Chapter 5, there are tensions between perceptions of risk and danger in outdoor play, and the learning potential of risk-taking and adventurous play. Rarely are these tensions examined critically, particularly in relation to children's motivations and purposes. Tovey captures some of the paradoxes of risky play when she describes how players simultaneously experience joy and fear, feelings of being in control and out of control, and the ways in which these risky experiences contribute to their sense of mastery and control of their bodies, emotions and material worlds. Tovey reports contrasting perceptions amongst the practitioners she interviewed, and, like Jarvis, challenges practitioners to understand that risky, adventurous play activities can be vital for children's well-being and for developing positive learning dispositions.

The following three chapters focus on different ways of understanding children's meaning-making through multi-modal activities, and provide insights into the ways in which children create and sustain their own subjective possibilities through play. Combining socio-cultural and post-structural perspectives, Hall, in Chapter 6, uses visual and participatory research methods to explore the communicative potential of young children's drawings. The research findings show that children use drawings to make sense of the world around them, to create their own worlds and cultures, and to create playful authoring spaces in which their identities become visible. Hall explores the themes of power, agency, control and transformation through the children's explanations of their drawings, which reveal their imaginative capabilities, social relationships and ways of interpreting their social and cultural worlds. In common with the work of Jarvis and Broadhead, gender emerges as a dimension of diversity in what children choose to draw, and the narratives they construct in and about their drawings.

In Chapter 7, Ring focuses on an action research project with early years teachers, using visual images, observations and narrative accounts to explore their thinking and practices about drawing. The project demonstrates the importance of practice-based action research collaborations, in which practitioners have the time and support to challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions about drawing as 'mark-making' rather than as a powerful way of making meaning. The findings have clear implications for practice: Ring argues that practitioners should make continuous provision for playful drawing; and develop their pedagogical skills in supporting playful drawing.

Similar perspectives are reported by Worthington in Chapter 8, drawing

on her ongoing research into children's mathematical graphics from their emergence in imaginative play. Taking a socio-cultural theoretical focus, the main focus is on young children's semiotic practices – the ways in which they explore, make and communicate meanings through complex signs or mental tools within their play, and the significance of signs as precursors of symbolic languages such as writing. As in the previous two chapters, Worthington describes the ways in which children's imaginative capabilities and internal representations become evident through their multi-modal communicative capabilities, including language, models, gestures, arrangements of artefacts and graphical representations. A direct relationship exists between children's ability to make meanings in play and to use marks and symbols to signify meanings. Thus, semiotic activities have social and relational significance for children as mediators of their internal and external worlds. In common with other authors in the book, Worthington argues for the pedagogical value of making and analysing observations of child-initiated play episodes, and of critical reflection in deepening professional knowledge and developing practice.

Howard in Chapter 9, and Whitebread in Chapter 10, draw on developmental psychology to research different aspects of play using experimental methods. Both authors report findings that attest to the fundamental power of play as a mechanism for learning and development, and to the role of adults in maximising this through their provision and cooperative engagement in play. Like Broadhead and Worthington, they describe how their research has developed cumulatively and over time, demonstrating the ways in which play scholars can become deeply immersed in the challenges and complexities of play. Howard continues a key theme in this book, namely the importance of understanding children's meanings and perspectives on playfulness as a mode of action, and especially what distinguishes play from other modes of action. Such a distinction could potentially prevent play being used as an umbrella category for all child-initiated activities. Using pictorial research methods enabled Howard to identify the cues that children use to signal play, and to control the experimental conditions in order to measure the impact of children perceiving a task as play. Howard makes important theory–practice links from her research: understanding children's views about their play can be formative and diagnostic, by informing the ways in which practitioners plan learning environments and opportunities where children adopt a playful mode of action that has a positive impact on task performance.
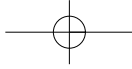
Whitebread goes on to synthesise the impact of socio-cultural theories on developmental psychology, in the context of understanding children's metacognitive and self-regulatory behaviours in play. He explains

the significance of metacognitive or self-regulatory processes when cognitive tasks involve effortful attempts to learn intentionally. This is an important concept for researchers and practitioners: the apparent spontaneity and fluidity of play sometimes masks the effortful components of children's activities and behaviours, especially in problem-solving, perspective-taking and emotional self-regulation. Thus, it can be argued that children's motivations to play are intrinsically enmeshed with their motivations to learn, which enables them to behave, in Vygotsky's metaphor, 'a head taller than themselves'. The observational study reported by Whitebread showed that the richest opportunities for self-regulatory behaviour were predominantly within playful contexts (especially open-ended pretend or symbolic play), and that these contexts were particularly powerful for developing problem-solving capabilities and creativity. Whitebread identifies the pedagogical practices that support the development of young children's self-regulatory capacities as learners, and the potential role of playful activity within this. These include providing children with emotional warmth and security, with feelings of control, with cognitive challenge and with opportunities to talk about their play and learning.

In the final chapter, the editors summarise some of the key issues that have arisen from these studies, and consider how the findings can be used to inform professional knowledge and practice, particularly in relation to developing playful learning and playful pedagogies. An important concept is highlighted by the authors in this book, namely that *what play means* for children is just as important as *what play does* for children. This book makes a key contribution to understanding children's meanings and purposes, and to reconceptualising pedagogy in ways that will enhance the potential for learning through play, within and beyond early childhood.

References

Cannella, G.S. and Viruru, R. (2004) *Childhood and Postcolonisation: Power, Education and Contemporary Practice.* London: Routledge.

Clark, C.D. (2009) *Transactions at Play: Play and Culture Studies, Vol. 9.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009) *Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum.* Available at: www.dcsf.gov.uk [Accessed June 2009]

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2008) *Fair Play: A Consultation on the Play Strategy.* London: DCSF. Available at: www.dcsf.gov.uk

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2004) *Getting Serious About Play.* Available at: www.dcms.gov.uk

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2006) *Time for Play.* Available at: www.dcms.gov.uk

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2007) *Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage.* London: DfES Publications.

Edwards, S. and Brooker, E. (eds) (2010) *Challenging Play.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Goodwin, A.L., Cheruvu, R. and Genishi, C. (2008) 'Responding to multiple diversities in early childhood education', in C. Genishi and A.L. Goodwin (eds) *Diversities in Early Childhood Education: Rethinking and Doing.* New York: Routledge.

MacNaughton, G. (2005) *Doing Foucault in Early Childhood Studies: Applying Poststructural Ideas.* London: Routledge.

Wood, E. (2009) 'Conceptualising a pedagogy of play: international perspectives from theory, policy and practice', in D. Kuschner (ed.) *From Children to Red Hatters®, Diverse Images and Issues of Play: Play and Culture Studies, Vol. 8,* pp. 166–89. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.