

# CHAPTER 1

## UNDERSTANDING PLAY: COMPLEXITY AND CHALLENGE

The aim of this introductory chapter is to review contemporary debates about play, focusing on the ideologies and theories that inform the ways in which play is defined. You will understand some of the key issues and challenges in:

- Defining play
- Debating the status of play
- Exploring lifelong playing and learning
- Making a distinction between play in and out of 'educational' settings
- Developing critical perspectives on play

### **The ideological tradition**

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Early childhood education is underpinned by an ideological and theoretical tradition which regards play as essential to learning and development. The eclectic mix of ideas from this tradition ranges from the rhapsodic to the pragmatic, regarding the value of play, the nature of childhood, the purposes of education, the rights of the child and adults' roles and responsibilities. Central to this tradition are the educational and psychological theories of Johann Pestalozzi, Freidrich Froebel, Rudolf Steiner, John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Margaret and Rachel McMillan, Susan Isaacs, Anna Freud and David Winnicot. Their ideas were innovative and transformational: they generated new ways of understanding childhood and how children should be treated in society. Until the nineteenth century, childhood was seen as an

immature form of adulthood and children from all social classes had little status and few legal rights or protection. For many, childhood was cut short by the need to work in the home or in factories, often for long hours and in dangerous conditions, leading to exploitation and abuse. The concept of original sin meant that children were regarded as naturally sinful, and needed to have moral rectitude instilled in them by whatever means adults thought acceptable, whether in the home, school or workplace. The child's mind was seen as an empty vessel, or a blank slate, which could be filled with the knowledge, skills and behaviours deemed valuable by society. Froebel and Pestalozzi took the opposite view: children's natural goodness could be harnessed through nurture, care, play and appropriate education. Along with social reformers such as Charles Booth and Charles Dickens, the early pioneers changed attitudes towards children and developed better provision for their development, care and education, where freedom to play and learn could be combined with appropriate nurturing and guidance. Inherently bound with this movement were ideals about social justice and a more egalitarian society.

The pioneer educators established the concept of childhood as a distinct stage in human development, and emphasized children's natural affinity for play. However, they did not demonstrate consistent agreement in their principles or practices. Although play was valued differently by each of the pioneers, they harnessed its educational potential in different ways (Saracho, 2010). The Romantic, child-centred ideology advocated the enabling of children to follow their natural development through free play and structured activities. Although the pioneers recognized that play allows children to express their inner needs, emotions, desires and conflicts, in terms of their educational recommendations it was not always the dominant activity. Montessori did not believe that children need to play, and did not value play as a creative force in itself. In designing special child-sized environments, she was not directly stimulating imaginative role play, but encouraging practical independence and autonomy. She had an instrumental view of play as a means to cognitive, social, moral and emotional development. The curriculum models devised by Froebel and Montessori were based on specific materials to be used in particular sequences, in carefully structured environments and sometimes with adult guidance. The curricula designed by Margaret and Rachel MacMillan and Susan Isaacs included pragmatic adult-directed elements such as sense-training, language and speech training, self-discipline, orderliness, cleanliness and the formation of good habits and dispositions (Boyce, 1946).

These curricula were socially, culturally and historically situated: they were designed with reference to particular values and purposes within rapidly changing societies. For example, the Progressive movement, which developed in the USA at the turn of the twentieth century, criticized the programmes of Froebel and Montessori as being highly structured, formal and ritualized. Montessori's emphasis on sensory training, individualism and academic learning

was considered to be at odds with notions of freedom, creativity, play, fantasy and self-expression. We might also consider whether Romantic notions of childhood freedom and innocence remain relevant in contemporary society: a Reception class teacher questioned why she taught nursery rhymes when children know all the words, actions and dance routines of the latest pop idols.

These ideologies and theories melded with those of the Progressive movement in early childhood and primary education, which emerged in the early twentieth century, informed by the work of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Susan and Nathan Isaacs and their followers. Progressivism rejected the formality and instrumentalism of established approaches, and argued for child-centred approaches and greater autonomy for children by enabling them to play and follow their interests through topics or projects. Progressivism created new ideas about the nature of childhood, how children learn and develop and the developmental processes of building knowledge. Education was conceptualized not as something that is done to the child, but as a complex process within which the child is an active participant, through agency, choice, control and ownership of play and project work. This orientation was theoretically seductive, because it reflected powerful notions of choice, freedom, autonomy and empowerment through education, all central tenets of the social and educational reform movements. These assumptions were a direct challenge to established behaviourist and instrumental discourses which positioned the child as a blank slate or empty vessel.

The work of the early childhood pioneers influenced a psychological view of play, which in turn laid the foundation for 'educational play'. The work of Jean Piaget (described in Chapter 2) has been influential in early childhood education, partly because his theories of play were interpreted alongside the ideals of Progressivism, and resonated with the liberal ideas of the 1960s. Thus a 'universal discourse' was created which positioned play as essential to children's learning, as a developmental need and as a fundamental right. Within this discourse, key ideas about child-centred education, choice and freedom, hands-on activities, exploration and discovery, and the primacy of play were taken up with enthusiasm but with little critical engagement (Bennett, Wood and Rogers, 1997).

### Activity

O'Brien (2010) poses some challenging questions about play, which prompt us to think critically about these 'universal discourses' and whether these serve to marginalize or include children who have disabilities. Consider

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these questions in relation to your own experiences of play as a child/ adult, and in your professional practice:

Can *all* children play? *Should* all children play? Do all children *learn* from play? And if they do learn, *what* do they learn? *Must* all children play in order to develop fully? Is, in fact, access to play one of children's *rights*? And, if many of the most prominent researchers in the field of child psychology ... have viewed play as endemic to the human species, why did they so rarely address children who appear to be outside the parameters of typical development? (O'Brien, 2010: 183)

Although many of these theories remain part of the discourse of early childhood education, there have been significant changes in the field, with play now being validated within many national policy frameworks (Broadhead, Howard and Wood, 2010; Brooker and Edwards, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson and Fler, 2009). However, policy versions of play are explicitly educational, because play is expected to lead towards (or at least contribute to) the learning goals or outcomes in curriculum frameworks. In Chapter 3 we will see that 'educational play' has its own purposes, but throughout this book research from the field of play scholarship will show that there are different ways of understanding the complexities of play, which reflect children's purposes and meanings. This is because play is a distinctive form of human activity which has its own rules, rituals and cultural practices, and is not always amenable to overly structured forms of social control within the educational/pedagogic gaze.

## The purposes of play

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In spite of positive endorsements from different theoretical perspectives, the definitions, purposes and value of play continue to be debated. These debates have had positive outcomes because they have kept play high on educational agendas in policy, research and practice. These trends can be seen in different countries as national policy frameworks are extended to early childhood provision with the aim of laying foundations for learning, improving children's life chances and raising achievement. Play continues to be taken seriously in the academic community, as evidenced by the scope of play scholarship across the human life span (Holzman, 2009; Hughes, 2010; Kuschner, 2009; Smith, 2010), across different contexts such as hospital and therapeutic play, and across different academic disciplines (Henricks, 2006; Saracho, 2012). Play and playfulness are considered to be lifelong activities: far from tailing off towards the end of childhood, play continues to develop in complexity and challenge

(Broadhead, 2004). Thus in order to understand these complexities, this book will draw on the international field of play scholarship and on different theoretical perspectives. The first question to be addressed is how can we define play?

## Defining play

In defining play, there are different emphases on functions, forms, characteristics and behaviours. Two questions continue to challenge the research and practitioner communities: what is play? And what does play do for the child? Chazan (2002: 198) takes a broad and positive view of the functions of play:

Playing and growing are synonymous with life itself. Playfulness bespeaks creativity and action, change and possibility of transformation. Play activity thus reflects the very existence of the self, that part of the organism that exists both independently and interdependently, that can reflect upon itself and be aware of its own existence. In being playful the child attains a degree of autonomy sustained by representations of his inner and outer worlds.

This definition indicates the potential variation and complexities of play as a social and cultural practice. Play activities involve a wide range of behaviours, actions and interactions, which may have multiple meanings for the players. Play can be regarded as deeply serious and purposeful, or trivial and purposeless. It can be characterized by high levels of motivation, creativity and learning, or perceived as aimless messing about, as shown in the following vignettes.



### Case study

#### Neill and Jamel: Play is serious or trivial?

Neill and Jamel (both aged five) did not settle immediately to a maths activity, but began play-fighting, using their pencils as swords. Their play was not aggressive, but as it became more noisy they fell off their chairs, were reprimanded by the teacher and separated for the rest of the session. In contrast, deep and serious play can be respected and encouraged by teachers. In a nursery, some boys were playing with Duplo™ and made a large layout on the floor. As the complexity of their play developed, they used other resources to create a town, including Playmobil™ figures that were used to act out various scenarios. The teacher realized the need to 'go with the flow' of their ideas and asked other children not to cut across their space or take away their equipment. The children were not interrupted to join in with mid-session circle time as their play continued to evolve over two hours. At review time they proudly explained their layout to the whole class, and dismantled it only after it had been shown to parents and caregivers.

It is not surprising that there are ambiguities about the definitions of play. Hutt et al. (1989) argue that play is a jumbo category that encompasses a multiplicity of activities, some of which are conducive to learning, but many of which are not. Garvey (1991) suggests that not everything that young children do together can be classified as play: there is a continuous moving back and forth among different activities with different modes of action, interaction and communication. Garvey regards play as an attitude or orientation that can manifest itself in numerous ways, according to what children play with, what they can play at, and the imaginary worlds and scenarios they create. These possibilities expand as new areas of experience are encountered, and as children's skills as players develop through childhood and into adulthood. Thus what play is, and what play does, cannot be constrained by theoretical or temporal definitions. Smith (2010: 4–5) identifies three ways of looking at play. In the functional approach, researchers focus on what the purpose of the behaviour is, or appears to be, and what are the potential benefits. In the structural approach, researchers focus on the behaviours themselves, the ways in which they are organized and sequenced, and what distinguishes play from non-play activities. The third approach is criteria-referenced, and is based on the observer's perspective for defining whether a behaviour sequence is play or not play. The more criteria that can be identified, the more likely it is that the activity or behaviour can be seen as play. In each of these approaches, play is defined by the researcher from a theoretical position, and not from the children's perspectives or the play context.

Meckley (2002) has drawn on Garvey's definition of play characteristics to provide qualitative descriptors of play, taking into account children's perspectives and the influence of the play context. Meckley's ideas are elaborated in Figure 1.1 to make links between what play is, what players do and what purposes play serves.

1 *Play is child-chosen*

Before children play, they have ideas about what they want to do and who they want to play with. As children start to play, they choose materials, activities and other players. Although children are in control of their play, they must cooperate and negotiate with others to play together. Because children choose their play and playmates, they are usually successful, even though the activities may include a lot of argy-bargy (Factor, 2009). They feel satisfied and proud of their accomplishments. Within a child's own play, no one but the child determines what is the right way or the wrong way because the child makes the rules for play within the framework of what is acceptable at home or in school. Children learn the most from play if it belongs to them. If adults choose children's activities or assign children to play areas, children consistently report that, from their perspective, this is work and not play (Dockett and Meckley, 2007; Howard, 2010). It follows that adults cannot plan children's play for them, but they plan for play by providing access to space, time and resources.

2 *Play is child-invented*

Play is not only chosen by children but also invented by them through their play cultures. Children are always creating something new when they play, such as a new construction or a new idea. To an adult, the construction may not be new because it may look just like another child's construction; to the child it is new because they tried and completed something that *they* never did before. In play, children are the inventors and experimenters: they take risks as they try out new activities and combinations. They create and solve problems and develop

metacognitive capabilities (being aware and in control of their plans, thoughts, actions and behaviours) (Whitebread, 2010).

3 *Play is pretend but done as if the activity were real*

Children learn a great deal in pretending with activities and ideas that are like real events but are not real. They develop understanding of cognitive, social and emotional concepts by playing with their working theories and funds of knowledge in new ways. They develop perspective about people, events, social relationships and rules through playing about them. Children use play to make sense of their everyday social and cultural experiences, but at the same time use those experiences to inform and develop their play. Play involves pretence: the 'what if' and 'as if' qualities of play make it distinctive from other activities.

4 *Play focuses on the doing (process not product)*

Play is the leading activity in early childhood (Vygotsky, 1978). The process or activity of play is where learning occurs. Communication is essential to play, through language, body movement, gestures, signs and symbolic representations. In play children use more complex language than in conversations with adults. Children frequently make their first attempts at reading and writing when they are playing, by acting as if they are competent readers and writers. The benefits of play may not always be visible or immediate, but may become clear and may be cumulative over time (Smith, 2010). Children may choose to create products in their play, which are often of immediate use or relevance (such as props that convey pretence).

5 *Play is done by the players (children) not the adults (teachers or parents)*

Play is what children choose and manage for themselves. Because children learn through the process of playing, they need plenty of time, open-ended materials and co-players (Broadhead, 2004; Broadhead and Burt, 2012). Adults cannot plan children's play, but they can help to plan for play, and to support children's own plans and activities. Adults provide the play/learning environments, the support, the rules, the safety, so that children can obtain the maximum benefits from playing. Adults can be co-players if they are invited to do so by the children, and if they can play on the children's terms.

6 *Play requires active involvement*

Because children's bodies, emotions and minds are active in play, they can learn about their own limits and set their own challenges. Given a choice, they often choose a task which is more challenging than one chosen by an adult (Whitebread, 2010: 173), which may require different approaches to learning. Play is where the activity of childhood is occurring: playful children develop their own play in their own ways and on their own terms. Play is done for its own sake and children can become deeply immersed in the mood or spirit of play. They see the world from the perspective of play, creating their own meanings, symbols and practices, which are imbued with cultural significance and result in self-development and self-actualization (Wood, 2010a). Play helps to sow the seeds of confidence (Dowling, 2010), including self-esteem, self-efficacy, positive dispositions and the ability to manage the everyday hurly-burly of making/breaking friendships, making up/falling out, leading/following, cooperating/contesting.

7 *Play is fun*

Play is typically fun and enjoyable because children choose their activities and playmates, and draw on their own motivation and ideas. However, play may not be fun or enjoyable if children cross the agreed boundaries of 'play' and 'not play'. Sutton-Smith (1997) cautions that we need to be alert to the occurrence of 'dark play' and 'cruel play', where children may engage in teasing, bullying and other forms of social aggression. These forms of play may be interpreted in different ways, according to the child and the context. Some children may not feel safe (emotionally, psychologically and physically), while others may develop emotional resilience and coping strategies.

**Figure 1.1 The characteristics of play**



Research studies that use play functions, behaviours and characteristics tend to reduce complex activities to component parts in terms of what play is and what play does. However, play is complex, variable and paradoxical, and always depends on the context in which it takes place. Play can be orderly and rule-bound or free and spontaneous; it can appear chaotic, but there can be rules and patterns within the activities that emerge over time. The purposes and goals of play often shift as children manipulate play and non-play situations because they understand implicitly that, in certain contexts, different types of behaviour are permitted, whereas others, such as rough and tumble and play-fighting, are often banned. Play does not take place in a vacuum: everything that children play at, or play with, is influenced by wider social, historical and cultural factors, so that understanding what play is and learning how to play are culturally and contextually situated processes. There are family, cultural and personal variations in approaches to learning (Chen, Masur and McNamee, 2011), and to play choices and activities which add another layer of complexity to defining play.

Given that play is varied and complex, can definitions help us to solve the problem of what play is and what play does for the child? Pellegrini (1991) and Saracho (1991) define play in terms of dispositions that players bring to events and activities (Figure 1.2).

- Play is personally motivated by the satisfaction embedded in the activity and is not governed either by basic needs and drives or by social demands.
- Players are concerned with activities more than with goals. Goals are self-imposed and the behaviour of the players is spontaneous.
- Play occurs with familiar objects or following the exploration of unfamiliar objects. Children supply their own meanings to play activities and control the activities themselves.
- Play activities can be non-literal.
- Play is free from rules imposed from the outside and the rules that do exist can be modified by the players.
- Play requires the active engagement of the players.

### Figure 1.2 Dispositions in play

These definitions indicate how play activities are qualitatively different from non-play activities. Although Pellegrini's definition states that play is free from rules imposed from the outside, this is not the case with play in educational settings. It is the imposition of adults' rules that makes 'educational play' different from child-initiated play in everyday contexts, because of the ways in which policy frameworks position play and the various constraints within pre-school and school settings. These definitions agree with Fromberg (1987: 36) that play is:

*Symbolic*, in that it represents reality with 'as if' or 'what if' attitude.

*Meaningful*, in that it connects or relates experiences.



*Pleasurable*, even when children engage seriously in an activity.

*Voluntary and intrinsically motivated*, whether the motives are curiosity, mastery, affiliation or others.

*Rule-governed*, whether implicitly or explicitly expressed.

*Episodic*, characterized by emerging and shifting goals that children develop spontaneously.

These criteria can be used differentially to categorize children's behaviour as a continuum from pure play to non-play:

As a result, play can be categorized as 'more or less play', not dichotomously as 'play or not play'. Behaviours meeting all criteria might be categorized as 'pure play', whereas behaviours with fewer components are 'less purely play'. Simply put, acts should not be categorized as 'play' or 'not play': they should be related along a continuum from 'pure play' to 'non-play'. (Pellegrini, 1991: 215)

The concept of a continuum from pure play to non-play is developed by Broadhead (2004; 2010), and is useful for early childhood practitioners for several reasons. First, not everything that children do in their self-chosen activities can, or should, be classified as play. Second, children step in and out of play in order to provide a framework for their activity and to maintain flow and direction. They may interrupt their play to find or make props, or to get assistance from peers or adults. Third, practitioners often adopt playful orientations to teaching and learning, for example by animating stories and providing imaginary scenarios for solving mathematical or technological problems (Worthington and Carruthers, 2003). They also model humour and playfulness in order to encourage engagement, involvement, interest and enjoyment. Finally, there are many different forms of play including: role play, socio-dramatic play, heuristic play, constructive play, free-flow play, structured play, rough-and-tumble play, technological play, all of which involve a wide range of activities and behaviours (as described in Chapter 2). Therefore when striving to understand play, we need to consider the varied contexts for play and play as a socio-cultural activity: the message that 'this is play' is fundamental to playful engagement and participation between peers, and between adults and children, in homes, communities and education settings.

Much attention is given to proving that play is useful for children's learning and development and is, therefore, educationally purposeful. There is substantial evidence that different forms of play promote a range of skills, learning processes and outcomes. For example, socio-dramatic play involving characters, roles and imaginary events is considered to be a complex form of play because it encourages representational thinking and symbolic actions (making one thing stand for something else) (Broadhead, 2004). Outdoor play with loose parts (tyres, crates, straw bales, fabrics, wood offcuts, planks,

logs and branches) and den building helps to develop social cooperation, flexibility and creativity (Brown, 2003; Knight, 2011a; 2011b). Constructive play involves mathematical and technological concepts, while sand and water play provide opportunities for learning scientific concepts (Carruthers and Worthington, 2011; Worthington and Carruthers, 2003). For older children, playful approaches to learning can include developing historical imagination through authentic activities such as museum visits, investigating artefacts and dramatizing factual events. Therefore, definitions of play should take into account different contexts as well as the cultures, interests, affective states and preferences of children at different ages: what counts as play will vary according to who is playing, the choice of play activity, and the knowledge and dispositions that children transfer from their home cultures and everyday experiences. Any play activity (particularly role play) is not one event, but many different multi-layered events. Therefore analyses of play need to capture the ways in which children's funds of knowledge are connected, how power relations operate and what other possibilities and events are conjured into the mix.

As these different definitions indicate, play is varied and complex. What adults want or choose to see in children's play may not be consistent with children's purposes and meanings, because these may not be immediately visible or accessible. This is because much play takes place 'in the mind', and symbolic activities are embedded in children's cultural and imaginative experiences. Play represents cognitive, affective, cultural, temporal, historical, social and physical interconnections, involving dialogue between:

- reality and imagination
- everyday worlds and play worlds
- past, present and future
- the logical and the absurd
- the known and the unknown
- the actual and the possible
- safety and risk
- structure and flexibility
- chaos and order.

In summary, Holzman (2009) argues that the focus on behaviour in play reflects a predominantly psychological approach, which leads to play being separated into constituent parts. Moreover, play behaviours and characteristics do not take account of play contexts, the variability of play and players, or the intentions, purposes and meanings of the players. Qualitative descriptions of play indicate its wholeness and complexity, particularly where children's purposes and meanings are foregrounded. In addition, children have their own definitions of play.

## Children's definitions

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Children's definitions of play focus on their choices (rather than adults' choices), their activities (rather than adults' instrumental objectives) and their freedom (rather than adults' expectations and directions) (Dockett and Meckley, 2007; Factor, 2009). Children have their own distinctions between work and play: they often associate work with adult-directed activity rather than free choice and child-initiated activity, and with sitting down rather than being active (Howard, 2010). The following comments from children aged six to seven reflect a range of views: they were recorded after a morning of play activities organized by post-graduate student teachers:

- 'No, we haven't been working this morning because we could choose.'
- 'Play is what you do when you choose, like Lego and things, but work is what the teacher tells you to do like reading and writing things down.'
- 'I think we've been playing and working. It was hard work making that go-kart because it kept falling to bits.'

Ethnographic studies of play capture the meaning and purposes of play from children's perspectives and reveal patterns and layers of complexity (Corsaro, 2004; Edmiston, 2008; Kelly-Byrne, 1989). In order to establish mutual awareness of play and non-play situations, children create roles, use symbols, redefine objects, transform ideas and determine the action through negotiation and shared meanings. Children play to detach themselves from reality but, at the same time, they get closer to reality: pretending to be frightened of a monster enables them to experience fear, but typically in an emotionally safe context. Their enactments of play themes and stories, or their creation of play scripts, reveal far more subtleties than academic definitions can capture. Moreover, play is not just about fantasy or pretence: children continuously weave in and out of play, transferring funds of cultural knowledge, skills and understanding from their interests and experiences, including popular culture and on-line play worlds (Edwards, 2010; Hedges, 2011a; Marsh, 2005; 2010). Play is rich with meanings that children create for themselves, and may want to keep hidden from the regulating gaze of adults because they are subverting or challenging adults' rules (Wood, 2013). Thus agency is central to understanding play from children's perspectives because play incorporates their desires to act in the world, to act on the world, and to see 'what happens if' and 'what happens when'. This is consistent with Sutton-Smith's discussion of the rhetoric of power within children's play: he argues that children always seek to have their own separate play culture, and within that, resistance against adult power and conventions is a hidden transcript of childhood (1997: 125). Similarly, Henricks (2011: 212) argues that in playful modes, self-interest (and the possibility of subterfuge from others) is to be expected, along with the willingness of players to exploit situations when they can.

Educational and psychological definitions do not capture the spirit and essence of play, especially where play is fractured into behavioural ‘units of analysis’. Other ways of defining play draw on philosophical idealism and humanitarianism, sociological and anthropological perspectives. Henricks sees play as ‘the laboratory of the possible’:

To play fully and imaginatively is to step sideways into another reality, between the cracks of ordinary life. Although that ordinary world, so full of cumbersome routines and responsibilities, is still visible to us, its images, strangely, are robbed of their powers. Selectively, players take the objects and ideas of routine life and hold them aloft. Like wilful children, they unscrew reality or rub it on their bodies or toss it across the room. Things are dismantled and built anew. (Henricks, 2006: 1)

Play has been credited with romantic, spiritual and existentialist dimensions: play is a mode of existence, a state of mind and a state of being (Henricks, 2006; Sutton-Smith, 1997). For Holzman (2009) children (and adults) are always in a state of being and becoming: in play children can be who they are, who they are not and who they want to be, by imagining and pretending. They can detach themselves from time, space, contexts and material conditions, in order to create new possibilities and invent new meanings. Children have inner power and potential which can be realized and revealed through play. Developing the capacity to play, and being in a state of play determines what players do, and enables them to be open to the spontaneous development of ideas, roles and opportunities. However, a paradox of play is that freedom does not mean that children can do anything they want to do, at any time, and with no concern for the consequences of their actions. As children learn and develop, they set the boundaries of their own play activities, and create ethical spaces in which they come to understand complex social issues such as power, authority, oppression, control, responsibility and altruism (Edmiston, 2008). Play does not have to include externally observable behaviours and actions. The spirit or essence of play can be invoked at any time and in any place. The following vignette exemplifies ‘instant play’ – the ‘in the moment’ playfulness of the human mind.



### Case study

#### Paul: A practical joke

The science theme in a Year 2 class was life processes and living things. The children had investigated eggs, learning the difference between the albumen and yolk. They had also incubated eggs and were waiting for them to hatch. Paul (aged six years and seven months) was fascinated by this topic. One day

he brought in an egg to show his teacher. Unknown to him, Paul's father (a keen ornithologist) had 'blown' the content of the egg, leaving a hollow shell. Paul showed the egg to his teacher, carefully concealing the holes:

*Paul:* Can you guess what's inside this egg?

*Teacher:* I guess there's some transparent albumen, and a yellow egg yolk.

*Paul:* No, you're wrong (crushes the egg in his hand). This is an egg joke!

The teacher was taking the pedagogical opportunity to reinforce factual knowledge, which perhaps makes Paul's punch-line all the more amusing. He successfully manipulated the play/not play situation by setting up the serious question, and he understood the ritual and structure of playing a practical joke.

Given its enormous diversity, there is little wonder that play defies precise definitions. However, despite its complexity and potential, and the breadth of play scholarship, the status of play remains problematic.

## The status of play

Although play has an idealized status in early childhood, there are competing discourses inside education, and more widely in society, which challenge this viewpoint. Play is often seen as a trivial activity, which is for leisure, fun and relaxation. When we say that something is 'child's play', we mean that something is easy and requires little effort. But the richness and diversity of play scholarship indicates the very opposite: play is complex, challenging and dynamic, and often makes high cognitive, social and emotional demands on the players. While many play activities do support learning and development, the 'outcomes' are often not visible or measurable. This goes some way to explaining why play occupies an ambiguous position in the 'educational play' discourse. On the one hand, early childhood professionals are encouraged to provide play because it is often promoted as *the* way of learning and can fulfil educational purposes. On the other hand, they are encouraged to provide play because it supports the free and natural expression of children's needs and interests. Thus practitioners have to struggle with educational and policy-centred versions of 'purposeful' play, as well as ideological versions of free play and free choice. The tensions between the rhetoric and reality of play remain a consistent theme in research and practice.

## Rhetoric and reality

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The tensions between rhetoric and reality create one of the main challenges for practitioners and remain a theme in much research on play in early childhood settings (Brooker, 2011; Martlew, Stephen and Ellis, 2011; Sherwood and Reifel, 2010). These tensions provided the impetus for a study of the relationship between teachers' thinking and classroom practice in a Reception class (four- to five-year-old children) in England (Bennett, Wood and Rogers, 1997). Nine teachers were studied for one year, with a focus on their beliefs and theories about the role and value of play, how they planned for play in the curriculum, and what factors enabled or constrained play in their classrooms. The teachers analysed videotaped episodes of play to discover whether their intentions were realized in practice. The evidence challenged the teachers' theories and beliefs, and revealed some of the reasons for the rhetoric–reality divide. Although there was common agreement that play is child-chosen and child-initiated, play was structured by time, resources, the learning environment, the planned or anticipated learning outcomes and downward pressures from the National Curriculum. Free play sometimes became noisy and disruptive, with children following their own, rather than the teacher's, agenda. Many of the activities the teachers planned enabled children to engage with curriculum content in playful ways, but work was sometimes disguised as play. Although they valued play as a medium for learning, other curriculum priorities meant that they did not involve themselves as co-players, and they spent little time assessing or understanding learning through play. Therefore play did not readily provide evidence of progress and achievement, because the teachers did not have time to observe, discuss and reflect, and feed their understanding into subsequent planning. One teacher described the complexities of managing play as 'spinning plates'. Other factors such as classroom layout, resources, class size and insufficient adult support also intervened between teachers' theories and practice so that their beliefs about play could not always be put into practice. In spite of these constraints, the teachers provided some interesting models of how they integrated play into the curriculum. The study demonstrated that achieving good quality play is resource-intensive and requires high levels of pedagogical skill and organization, as well as time and expertise to observe, assess and interpret children's meanings and intentions.

The rhetoric–reality problem is also enmeshed in wider societal perceptions. Play can have a life of its own because it belongs to the private worlds of children and is often invested with a mystique that is integral to childhood. Sutton-Smith (1997) notes the disagreement among Western philosophers as to whether play is basically orderly and rule-governed, or a chaotic, violent and indeterminate interaction of forces. The latter view of play is problematic in educational settings because it may threaten adults' control, disrupt their choices, challenge their values or provoke concerns about risks and hazards. Within the dominant 'play as education' discourse, policy frameworks require

practitioners to ensure that play is purposeful and educational in that it results in defined learning outcomes, a theme that will be explored in Chapter 3. The 'quality' of play is evaluated in relation to pedagogical effectiveness, rather than the more complex processes discussed in this chapter. Play continues to be seen as preparatory to 'real' learning in school and may not be valued or understood by parents or colleagues. While policy discourses emphasize the need for 'more challenging work', there is no acknowledgement of children's needs (and their rights) for more challenging play. In addition, frequent 'media panics' and the 'toxic childhoods' discourse are based on adults' concerns about the changing forms of play in contemporary childhoods.

### Contemporary forms of play

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The historical development of children's play reveals continuities and changes, with ongoing debates about the value of 'free' versus 'structured' play. These debates often reflect adults' value judgements about what is 'good' and 'bad' play in relation to the potential outcomes, or its perceived social value. However, play has its own purposes and value, because it belongs to children's private or secret worlds and is often invested with a mystique that is truly child-centred and therefore not accessible to adults. Because play can be chaotic, anarchic, subversive and unpredictable, adults try to control and manipulate play both inside and outside the home. Taming play is about taming children. Allowing children to make choices and decisions may be theoretically seductive, but can be threatening to adults' control. Thus play is not just the natural and spontaneous activity of childhood, but sites in which power relationships are played out in many different ways. As Henricks (2010: 198) argues, players wish to do more than reassure themselves about their own powers: they wish to know what the world will do when it is provoked. Implicated in these power relationships are strategies for including and excluding peers on the basis of gender, ethnicity and special needs (Blaise, 2005; 2010; Jarvis, 2007; Skånfors, Löfdahl and Hägglund, 2009), themes that will recur throughout this book.

Children still enjoy many 'traditional' activities such as construction, den-building, sand and water, and creating secret spaces and places (Moore, 2010) (see Chapter 6). But they are also engaging in contemporary forms of play in on-line and virtual communities, with ever-expanding opportunities for where, when and how they play (Marsh, 2010). These trends have provoked debates around the influence of popular cultures, the amount of 'screen time' spent on computer games and social networking sites, the reduction in outdoor and physical play and the rise in childhood (and adult) obesity. Children's natural tendencies to play provide a lucrative market in popular culture, which influences children's choices and activities. They are exposed to many different media influences, and readily use 'pester power' to demand the latest must-have



collectable toys, computer games and other spin-offs that are tied to 'product placement' films and television programmes. There are different viewpoints about these trends: educators and parents may resent this commercial and economic exploitation, and may question the educational value and quality of these products. Marsh and Millard (2000) note that possibly the single most overriding adult objection to popular cultural texts is the prevalence of violence, especially in superhero sagas, cartoons, action-adventure films and programmes, comics, magazines and computer games. In contrast, Cohen (1993) argues that toys and characters from television programmes and films can provide rich 'springboards for fantasy'. This raises the question of who is providing the springboards and controlling the fantasies – adults or children? Marsh and Millard (2000) argue that children are not passive recipients of shifting and often transient trends in popular culture: they both accept and reject the products offered, and create their own cultural practices based on their experiences in their home, community and friendship groups. Research studies reveal the creative potential of contemporary forms of play in virtual spaces and with technological media (Marsh, 2010; Wohlwend, 2009). Thus there are arguments for practitioners using rather than ignoring children's popular culture as a means of building on children's interests and experiences, and enabling them to experiment with different forms of representation (Edwards, 2010; Wolfe and Flewitt, 2010).

There are other influences in society that question the status of play and reflect some of the paradoxes of post-modern life. In their leisure time, children may be channelled into clubs and activities that some parents see as having higher status and lower risk than traditional forms of play. Fears for children's safety and inadequate time and space have reportedly reduced opportunities for outdoor play (Bilton, 2010; Knight, 2011a; 2011b; Tovey, 2010) and physically active play (Brady et al., 2008; Kapasi and Gleave, 2009). Physical play may be seen as part of a health and fitness regime (under adults' control) rather than freely chosen outdoor play with its greater potential for risk, adventure and challenge. Decreasing levels of physical activity have given rise to concerns about increasing levels of obesity in childhood, again linked to the amount of 'screen time' that children are allowed. Thus the media panics and toxic childhoods discourse lead to the conclusion that there are almost as many 'dangers' in home play environments as there are outdoors, and a more balanced perspective on these issues needs to be debated in relation to lifelong play.

## Lifelong playing and learning

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If playing and growing are synonymous with life itself, then lifelong playing can be seen as an important aspect of lifelong learning and well-being. In the educational play discourse, play becomes less relevant to children beyond the age of five, although it may be allowed in 'choosing time' in Key Stage 1. By

Key Stage 2, play in school tends to become a distant memory except as organized games and outdoor playtime. This is ironic given that toy and games manufacturers have perceived the inherent need for play to change and progress from childhood into adulthood, with new forms of technological play leading the way. For example, Lego™ provides a carefully sequenced range of construction kits from Duplo™ for pre-school children, to the more complex LegoTechnik™ and computer programs for older children.

Beyond childhood, the status of play is enhanced when it contributes to productivity and effective working practices. Adults are encouraged to use their leisure time productively in playing games to maintain health and fitness. Role-play techniques are used in training programmes in business and industry for enabling people to deal with difficult situations, rehearse strategies and cope with emotional responses (Holzman, 2009). Firefighters, police officers, paramedics and the armed forces use invented scenarios and virtual environments to learn techniques and strategies, and to act out their feelings in difficult situations. Play is used as an incentive and reward for successful performance in business: there are companies that specialize in organizing 'executive play' breaks, including white-water rafting, health and beauty weekends, rally driving and bungee jumping. A stroll around a toyshop reveals a wide range of board games for adults and increasingly sophisticated electronic games that can be played at home or on the move. Many virtual-reality computer games are based on role-play scenarios where players take on a character and work out strategies and actions in response to problems. Players can connect virtually from any time zone or region of the world and create their own play communities

Playful contests (such as beauty pageants and drinking games).  
Carnivals, circuses and parades.  
Festivals and feasts.  
Playgrounds and theme parks.  
Community and national celebrations.  
Games and sports, including national and international contests and championships (for example the Olympics).  
Extreme sports that involve high levels of challenge and risk (bungee jumping, white-water rafting, sky diving).  
Theatrical performances (music, dance, drama, comedy acts, pantomime, films).  
Clubs and leisure activities.  
Travel, exploration and adventure activities.  
Mind play (dreams, fantasies, word games, puzzles, mind games).

**Figure 1.3** Different forms of play

and cultures. We are encouraged to adopt a 'use it or lose it' approach to our brains and bodies as we age: doing crosswords, playing games such as bridge and bingo, and remaining physically and socially active can maintain mental, emotional and physical health. Far from play being an exclusive occupation of childhood, human beings are lifelong players.

In a scholarly review of play research, Sutton-Smith (2001) describes many different forms of play and play contexts that span childhood and adulthood, including those that represent expert levels of skill (such as in sport) and bring high rewards and social status (Figure 1.3). Play and playfulness are thus deeply embedded across the lifespan as cultural activities that have a wide variety of meanings and significance. Different forms of play serve many different purposes, from the individual mind at play in a game of chess, to whole communities at play in carnivals and festivals.

## Linking play in childhood and adulthood

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There are lifelong links between children's play worlds and subsequent adult roles, identities and occupations. The imaginary worlds that are constructed in childhood can develop into adulthood and become more elaborate and structured (Cohen and MacKeith, 1991). For example, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright played with Froebelian building blocks and acknowledged the influence these had on his later career. The musicians Jacqueline and Hilary du Pré grew up in a playful musical world, with a mother who was an inspiring co-player:

From as early as I can remember, Mum entertained us with music. She was always singing, playing the piano, clapping and stepping rhythms, making shapes in the air according to the phrase shapes. We curled into the tiniest forms when the music was soft, and burst out jumping in the air when it was loud. We tiptoed and crouched for creepy music and skipped to dotted rhythms. We had to convey ferocity or tragedy and all as a spontaneous reaction to her playing. (du Pré and du Pré, 1997: 29)

Their mother wrote tunes especially for Jacqueline because there was nothing suitable for a young budding cellist. The tunes were illustrated with drawings and stories of everyday events such as a visit to the zoo, as well as fantastical tales about witches and elves. In contrast, the formative years of the writers Charlotte and Emily Brontë could not have been more different. Their mother was often ill; their father was stern, aloof and absorbed in his work. The children found escape from a gloomy and lonely childhood through inventing and acting out plays which often drew on their knowledge of famous characters in history. Their brother Branwell's box of toy soldiers provided the props for the stories. By the age of 13, Charlotte Brontë was an avid writer of tales, dramas, romances and poems, which were written in minute handwriting in their 'little magazines'. Not surprisingly, escapism was a recurring theme in their tales of adventure, shipwreck and creating new societies in far-off islands. These examples show how children's play worlds can influence their subsequent pathways into

adulthood. It is always interesting to ask students and teachers how they played and what they played with as children. Almost invariably there is a lot of 'school play' involving toys, peers, siblings and sometimes adults.

Playfulness, imagination and creativity are inextricably linked in our playing and working lives. Increasingly in adulthood we engage in different forms of play; for example playing with ideas, roles, words, media, meanings, and with relationships between events, people, concepts, materials and systems. Young people have one foot in childhood and the other in adulthood – they too are playfully being and becoming. They gradually play their way into the next stage of their lives by projecting images and adopting roles that are often influenced by the media and popular culture. The dressing-up box of childhood becomes the wardrobe of adulthood, whether it is a suit for work, the latest fashions for going out clubbing, a hi-tech outfit for a sports activity or a fancy-dress outfit for a party. For many adults, play is still a deeply enjoyable experience and maintains the possibilities for change and transformation identified by Chazan (2002). For example, a group of girls and boys played energetically for two hours on a beach, digging holes and burying each other, building sand castles and sand sculptures and creating a miniature Neolithic stone circle which closely resembled Stonehenge. Their playfulness flowed between rough and tumble, construction, teasing and joking. Between the playful banter these young people (who were 17–18 years old) discussed their forthcoming exam results, their preparations for going to university and their hopes and fears for the future. Play is riddled with paradoxes: children and adults often work quite hard at their play in terms of effort, motivation, concentration and outcomes. Children play at being adults, while adults continue to enjoy playing in the sand. Play in childhood is seen as trivial: play in adulthood can have high status and bring rich rewards, even though this might involve the drudgery of practice, the discipline of training and endless competitions to maintain status. Creating a continuum between lifelong playing and learning is perhaps even more critical in the twenty-first century as economic success relies on people who are creative, flexible, innovative, imaginative and playful in the workplace.

## Summary

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The general mistrust of play in educational contexts arises from three sources:

- 1 The lack of a precise operational definition of play.
- 2 The persistent view that play is the opposite of work.
- 3 The fear of play as subversion.

From an educational view, play is less likely to produce either tangible evidence of learning or contribute to the learning outcomes that are valued in curriculum frameworks. Practitioners therefore have to tame play in order to justify its contribution to 'effective' teaching and learning. However, there are different

constructs of 'effectiveness' and 'quality' in early childhood education, and the pragmatic educational discourse needs to be balanced alongside different theoretical perspectives, which are the focus of Chapter 2.

### Activity

Think about your own play life as a child, including your choices, activities and preferences.

In a group, make a time line that is divided into age bands, starting with your earliest play memories. Make a note of what forms of play you engaged in, who you played with and where. Discuss these as a group; note any trends, similarities or differences and how these can be explained.

Discuss what rules were imposed on your play by adults (think about the home, community and school contexts). Now discuss the ways in which you broke or subverted those rules and whether there were any consequences.

Discuss what forms of play you engage in now and the extent to which technological tools and media are part of your play lives.

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