

4TH EDITION

THE Excellence of Play

Edited by
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Praise for this book

Janet Moyles's 'The Excellence of Play' has become a corner-stone of Early Childhood Education and Care and provides evidence that young children learn best by playing, exploring, experimenting – in short having exciting, adventurous, creative experiences which are meaningful and interest them. The ideas and examples in the chapters from Janet and her co-writers (many of them 'new') are a source of utter delight. Please, please someone, make this book compulsory reading for MPs and policy wonks.

Tricia David, Emeritus Professor, Canterbury Christ Church University

'The Excellence of Play' is now in its 4th edition and this is testimony to how thought-provoking an edited collection it continues to be. This much anticipated new edition does not disappoint: there are chapters written by foremost authors in the field and a vast array of perspectives on play are gathered together in one volume. In summary, this book is a valuable contribution to the field of Early Childhood Studies and should be considered essential reading for students and practitioners alike. On reading this book, one is left in no doubt about the primacy of play in young children's lives and the important role of adults in supporting their play.

Dr. Deborah Albon, London Metropolitan University

This book explores play from differing perspectives, which combine to provide a thought-provoking and comprehensive account of its value. The rigorous introduction examines and explains the relevance of the different chapters, written by experts in their fields, placing them in historical, cultural, psychosocial, curricular and pedagogical contexts.

This new edition of a classic text offers encouragement as well as information to all working with young children and their families. It provides grounded evidence for the importance of play, spelling out the complex but crucial contribution it makes to self-regulation, motivation and well-being, which are under threat in current conditions. Readers will be equipped to affirm and disseminate the importance of ensuring that future generations benefit from meaningful play.

Wendy Scott, President TACTYC

Play absorbs children; it fascinates them. It also fascinates and intrigues teachers, researchers and theorists, as the fourth edition of this book demonstrates. Its contributors do justice to the delights, complexities, puzzles and imponderables of play and make a powerful case against the undue "schoolification" of childhood and for the "playification" of schooling.

*Colin Richards, HMI (retired) Emeritus Professor of Education,
University of Cumbria*

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International dimensions of play and transitions

Sally Peters

Summary

This chapter considers the role of play in supporting children as they move from early childhood education to school. It will draw on a number of the author's New Zealand studies that look at children's learning journeys as they move between early childhood education (ECE) and school contexts and curricula. The ideas will be located within some of the international discussions on this topic, and also introduce some of the strategies teachers have utilised to enhance the role of play in transitions and the research findings associated with this approach.

Cameo 1

Joe discusses with his teacher how he felt about starting school: 'I wanna stay at day care 'cause you have to be in clothes, not a uniform . . . you had to be in clothes . . . and you can do anything.' Asked if there's anything specific he misses he reflects 'I, I, I miss that . . . um, the big playground because on the playground is a slide, it's pretty fast.' Later he adds 'I, I, I miss about those bikes because I know bikes . . . and, and I know bikes and go really fast and we have a slide for bikes and they go really fast.'

Introduction

One can't help but wonder what school holds in store for Joe, who 'knows bikes', and plans to be a 'dinosaur catcher' when he grows up. He's interested in speed (on bikes and slides), and likes rugby and basketball. What can the stories of Joe and his classmates tell us about the experiences of children as they make the move to formal schooling? How might supporting their transitions so they have a positive start influence their achievement later? Although New Zealand has a generally high level of

educational attainment there is concern about the gap between the highest and lowest performers, and regular comment about the 'tail' in achievement data (see, e.g., New Zealand Treasury, 2008; Clark, 2013). However, as Macfarlane (2014) notes, perhaps it is time to focus more on the tales rather than the tails. This chapter draws on a number of the author's studies exploring stories of children's learning journeys as they transition between ECE and school settings, and through this offers a perspective from New Zealand on play and transitions. While the unique features of the New Zealand context help to shape the data, the ideas resonate with international literature on this topic.

This chapter briefly outlines the New Zealand context in which the studies have taken place. It then touches on pre-transition play, explores ways of connecting the learning journey across the transition, play in the early weeks at school and some of the practical strategies our teachers have been exploring with transition pedagogies and play.

New Zealand context

In New Zealand the transition from ECE to school, in terms of both the context and curriculum, almost always occurs as children turn five. Earlier in this volume, Dunlop and Fabian consider play and transitions with a focus on what they call 'atypical' transitions where children join an established class. In New Zealand, because children start school on or just after their fifth birthday, joining an established class is typical for 'new entrants' here, raising some specific challenges for both children and their teachers.

Peters (2010) provides some background about the context and a review of New Zealand research on transitions. (Curriculum documents for ECE (Ministry of Education, 1996) and school (Ministry of Education, 2007; 2008) can be found online.) When thinking about early years curriculum planning, one problem is 'making the selection of the most important aspects of culture for transmission to the next generation. The crucial cultural question is 'What is worthwhile?' and the crucial political question is 'Who makes the selection?' (Lawton, cited in Mutch, 2001: 75). With differing views about what is worthwhile, and about how to achieve what is deemed worthwhile, curricula for young children can be experienced as 'sites of struggle' between ideas about what early years education is for, and what are appropriate content and contexts for learning and development (Soler and Miller, 2003). Often this struggle intensifies at the point of transition between early childhood education and school, and ideas about the role of play are often located within this struggle.

Pre-transition play

This section touches briefly on some of the benefits of play pre-transition to school. There are many aspects that could be considered here and this is by no means intended to capture them all, only to highlight two possibilities. The first relates to play about school as a preparation or priming activity (Broström, 2005; Hartley *et al.*, 2012). The second considers the development of children's 'working theories' as a foundation of learning on which to build.

Play as preparation

It has been suggested that some aspects of play can act as valuable priming events for school (Hartley *et al.*, 2012), and Broström (2005) wrote about the possibilities of play to be a transitory activity, which helps the children involved to be active, rather than passive learners.

In our recent study (Peters and Paki, forthcoming) some early childhood services include school uniforms in their dressing-up corners and visits to school provide opportunities for children to explore and discuss what school will be like. Videos on the school website (led and narrated by children) also introduce early childhood children to school life. At one centre the five year olds also came back to their early childhood centre to talk to the older four year olds about school and to answer their questions. ECE cooking activities focused on making food for lunchboxes and on Fridays the children ate from lunchboxes as if they were at school. In another ECE setting that was located on a school site the ECE children regularly spent time at school, and siblings and friends in both contexts could converse through the fence.

Having some first-hand knowledge and props to explore understandings of school through socio-dramatic play seemed beneficial preparation. Within this, as Dockett and Perry (2006) recommend, teachers can prompt 'what-if games' to work through possible problems and strategies. One of the teacher researchers on our *Learning Journeys* project commented:

It means that our kids are ... 'Hey I can actually go to school and I'm confident to go to school.' ... If you go into preschool room, not one of those kids is scared to go to school, I'm going to turn five and I'm going to school'. But before that I don't think we'd set them up enough. So I definitely think you've got to set your kids up to win. Otherwise they are going to fail. And then you're going to wonder why they've failed.

Joe's mother commented on how well Joe's early childhood centre had been 'exposing him to school. A lot of interaction, sports day, school days that they are invited to. It makes it easier'.

The development of working theories

Within a pedagogy of play in ECE there has been interest in fostering the development of children's working theories (Davis and Peters, 2011; Peters and Davis, 2012; Hedges, 2014). The New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* notes that:

... in early childhood, children are developing more elaborate and useful working theories about themselves and about the people, places, and things in their lives. These working theories contain a combination of knowledge about the world, skills and strategies, attitudes, and expectations ...

(Ministry of Education, 1996: 44)

In a project exploring working theories (Davis and Peters, 2011) we were surprised at the astonishing depth to many children's theorising and thoughtful practitioners explored ways of supporting and extending this thinking. For example, showing children photographs and videos of their play led to the children extending their original ideas and also gave the adults chance to reflect on the ways they were tuning in to spoken and unspoken theories.

During the research we noticed how easy it was for adults to assume knowledge of the child's interest and meaning, and hijack the direction of the activity or conversation, rather than taking the time to adapt and fit with the child's thinking. As discussed in Peters and Davis (2011), supporting children's working theory development and intervening where appropriate (or even judging when is appropriate) is not easy. Earlier work in the Effective Provision of Pre-School Services (EPPE) project in England found that sustained adult-child interactions, which they called 'sustained shared thinking', although associated with high cognitive outcomes for children, occurred infrequently in the participating early childhood centres. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2008) noted that, even in the EPPE settings that were identified as good or excellent, only 5.5 per cent of questions asked by early childhood staff were open-ended and encouraged speculation or trial and error, and/or provided potential for sustained shared thinking.

Our research suggests that, even when there's sustained interaction and working together, the occasions where adults genuinely work with the child's theory, rather than hijacking the direction may be even less common. However, play does offer a rich context for thinking to develop and such dialogue to occur. Children's working theories are often more sophisticated in areas of interest/expertise than in aspects of more fleeting interest, and sensitive families and teachers know when it is appropriate to engage with this thinking (Crowley and Jacobs, 2002). If a new entrant teacher was aware of the child's current theories he/she would be more able to build appropriately on these to support children's learning.

Connecting learning journeys across the transition

The New Zealand Curriculum for school includes the requirement for school learning to 'build on the learning experiences the child brings with them' (Ministry of Education, 2007: 41). However, teachers are still exploring ways of identifying the richness of that prior learning, and finding ways to recognise and extend it. Our Education Minister recently stated, 'I dare to imagine a world where all teachers formally handover their young charges to the next sector with a meeting, a discussion between professionals about each child, a passing on of their learning story and so on' (Parata, 2013). However, the chance for professionals to discuss individual children's learning at transition points is not happening yet, although many families do share the child's early childhood portfolio with school (see Hartley *et al.*, 2012, Chapter 3, for an example of using the portfolio as a transition tool). Some early childhood centres create special 'transition' portfolios for the families to pass on to school. The portfolios generally capture valued aspects of learning within narrative Learning Stories (Carr, 2001; Carr and Lee, 2012), often with photographs as well. This provides some insights into the child's play, interests and friendships.

Play in the early weeks at school

Some schools use Learning Stories, too. In a resource for school teachers that includes an example of how to write a Learning Story, the example is based on a child's play on the flying fox at school and highlights behaviours associated with the key competencies evident in her play (Davis *et al.*, 2013). Overseas, some teachers have experimented with more playful pedagogies at school (e.g. Martlew *et al.*, 2011; Reynolds *et al.*, 2011). Some exploration in this direction is evident in New Zealand, too. As noted earlier, opportunities for play can provide a permeable space for children's interests to be included in the curriculum. It has been shown to be valuable for learning dispositions too. Carr *et al.*'s (2009) research studied children's learning dispositions of reciprocity, imagination and resilience as they moved from early childhood to school. They found that 'children's learning dispositions are fragile in the onslaught of any school curriculum that is packed with compulsory tasks, tight scheduling and summative assessments – and does not recognise learning dispositions in practice or in documentation' (p. 220). However, although many new entrant teachers may value play and a more open approach to curriculum, for the majority of children there's often a change in the nature of play once they get to school. Like Joe, they find play at school very different to prior-to-and out-of-school play.

The nature of play at school

One marked difference between play in ECE and school is that school entry often introduces distinction between 'work' and 'play', with work being prioritised by teachers, even though much learning occurs also through play. Times to play also change, with play often restricted to moments in class when work has been completed or to lunchtime and playtime. Looking back on his transition, Steve reflected on this change, noting, 'At kindy you could just play and everything but at school you have to do what you had to do. At kindy you could really choose.' At school he had felt he would have liked to 'go out to play when I had to stay in and do work and everything. Sometimes when I was out to play I actually wanted to go in and do some work.'

Play in the playground

The context for play is also different at school. Steve commented, '[At school] there was lots of big people there and the playgrounds were much bigger, and better, and there was no really small people there except a few new people.' Although the playgrounds were better he felt 'lonely' and 'bored' 'cos you've no idea what to do'.

Like Steve, Joe and his peers did not particularly enjoy school 'playtime':

- Teacher:* OK, now we've got the tricky bit. What don't you like about school?
Mere: Playtime.
Teacher: Tell me why you don't like playtime.
Mere: 'Cause we don't do any learning.
Teacher: OK – interesting.

- Joe:* The same, same.
Teacher: Mandy, what don't you like at school?
Mandy: Playtime.

Joe's explanation linked back to his comment in the opening paragraph of this chapter where he said he preferred wearing his own clothes in ECE rather than the uniform at school. 'I don't like playtime 'cause we get hot and I take off my jersey then I get cold and I put on my jersey and I took off my jersey and I get cold.' Mandy agreed, 'Sometime when it's cold when I don't have my jersey, I don't feel hot, I'm cold.' While it might be tempting to see complaints about jerseys as trivial, underpinning this is the fact that for New Zealand children, school is often the first time when they have been required to 'play' outside for a set period of time whether they want to or not, regardless of temperature. In addition, as one teacher noted 'There's a gazillion children with the same clothes', so managing not to lose a jersey if you take it off is an added responsibility for a five year old who is already negotiating a new environment. No wonder some new-entrant children express a sense of relief when it is raining and they can stay inside.

No one to play with

Distress at not having anyone to play with during lunchtimes and break can also be an issue, and in some cases lead to a dislike of school (Peters, 2004; 2012). Some of our recent data reflected the same concerns as children in Peters (2004) had expressed a decade earlier:

- Teacher:* How were you feeling when you started school?
Brian: Angry.
Teacher: Why?
Brian: Because no one's going to play with me and I wanted to go on my iPad.
Teacher: What made you think no one was going to play with you?
Brian: Because I was trying to find someone to play with me ... I can't even find anyone.
Teacher: OK. Is that why you played with your brother?
Brian: Yeah.
Teacher: What about the buddies you were put with in class?
Brian: [Pauses] ... They, I didn't like them, they didn't want to play with me.
Later in the conversation ...
Teacher: What don't you like about school Brian?
Brian: [Pauses] ... Not having friends and not playing with them or walking around who won't wait for me.

There's the big space and lots of children that make it difficult to find a familiar face. There's also the challenge of gaining entry into peer groups, perhaps made more difficult by the New Zealand system of children joining existing classes. Even previous friends from the same early childhood centre may have made other friends by the time a new child arrives. Others join classes where they don't know anyone.

Findings from earlier research still seem applicable to playground observations today. For example, Corsaro's (1981) research with nursery-aged children found that young children do not readily accept new playmates, and requests to play were greeted with rejection about half of the time. Howes (1988) found that being rebuffed was more common for children without friends than for those with friends. However, Corsaro (1981) noted that initial resistance did not always result in permanent exclusion. Unfortunately, some children do not appear to have discovered that initial resistance could be overcome and spend much of the break time wandering, waiting for the time to pass. ECE settings that help children develop strategies for social interaction are assisting children with valuable skills for school entry.

Having something to play with

Although social skills are important, friendships do not rest solely with the child. Contextual factors play a key part, too. In an earlier study (see Peters, 2012) it appeared that including more resources to play with at school could be helpful in facilitating entry to social groups for children who found it hard to gain access by other means. This can be particularly important for children who do not share the dominant language of the school setting. For example, when Yuka, who could speak almost no English at all when she started school, brought a doll from home, she became engaged in sustained family play with a number of other girls in her class over the lunchtime period. From then on she often took her dolls to school. Her mother noted, 'Once she realised that she could bring her dolls and she could play with other children with dolls she was very happy.' Gregory (2005) also found that play at school was valuable for bilingual children who used home language in their socio-dramatic play, gradually inserting English words and experimenting with language. The ways in which resources supported communication between children with different languages, and how in meaningful play contexts mime and gesture were used along with increasing vocabulary to develop shared understandings was also noted by Long (1997).

Transition pedagogies and play

With all of the points raised in this chapter in mind, teacher researchers in our Learning Journeys project (Peters and Paki, forthcoming) have been exploring a range of transition pedagogies. Play can offer an important context for learning in school. It can reveal important attributes and understanding that are more difficult to gain through other activities.

Addressing the challenges of play in the playground has also proved a valuable context for learning within the class. Prompted by playground observations showing changes in the children's play from preschool to school, and awareness of the possible challenges for new children when preschool children and teachers experienced the rush of children coming out to play when the bell rang, teachers sought children's views about play.

First steps after listening to the children were to create quiet places to play near the new entrant classrooms, with trays of toys to play with. This small step had a big impact for new children, providing an alternative to the noise and bustle of the larger

playgrounds. Later, quiet places to meet friends were also identified, but the tray of toys by the classroom meant children were less dependent on others to play with, while also having resources to aid interaction.

The children's initial ideas also formed part of a DVD to share with new children and parents. The children and teachers then went on to co-construct large books about the playground. These included photographs of what the children saw as important and what happens on rainy days, and the meaning of symbols (such as flags showing that an area is too wet to play in after rain). They highlighted the areas they enjoyed playing in, including ones they felt new children needed information about such as 'the back field' and 'the big hill', and all the quieter places to play. This book could then be shared and discussed with new children as they arrived.

Teachers took seriously the difficulties children experienced in joining groups of peers, and worked with the children on the kind of approaches they might use if they wanted to play. They also discussed with the children what they might do if a child was trying to join their play. This work aligned closely with the key competencies in the curriculum. The curriculum also notes the importance of taking account of the child's whole experience of school (Ministry of Education, 2007: 41). Listening to and supporting children's concerns about their thoughts and feelings created more personalised transition pedagogies.

This has been noticed and appreciated by parents and caregivers too:

... it's really changed this year, the whole transitional process has ... yeah ... is amazing ... With having a second [child starting school now], which has been really interesting to be able to compare. Completely different ... Just being able to put strategies into place straight away before things get out of hand, you know. 'Cos once they get out of hand, it's a bit late then. I think this study has been what has helped both sides [ECE and school] put in the kind of strategies and procedures to help the kids out.

(Parent interview)

Conclusion

While there appears to be widespread support for the benefits of play, there is much to be considered in relation to the role of play and the transition to school. This fits within a bigger picture of understanding children's whole experience of school and taking seriously their concerns. This chapter has shared some of the work of teachers who have been focused on the subtle nuances of pedagogy that can adapt to support the diverse range of children who join their classes, with the aim of enhancing their learning over time. However, this is part of a learning journey for the adults, too, and the work is continuing. As for Joe, so far so good. His mother notes, 'He comes home very excited about his achievements ... He's progressing really well ... He seems to enjoy school ... He's socially secure and everything out of that will follow. That belonging and stability and acceptance.' We hope to be able to achieve that for all children starting school.

Questions to promote reflection

- 1 How has paying closer attention to the stories (tales) of children's experiences at school provided you with insights when considering their achievement (both successes and 'tails')?
- 2 What strategies can adults use to avoid 'hijacking' the direction of children's thinking during their play?
- 3 In what ways might teachers support children's play in the school playground?

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Endpiece

Tina Bruce

Through their play, children become partners with their future, but they need adults who are informed advocates, promoting, protecting and tuning in to their free-flow play (Bruce, 1991). The socio-cultural environment is important in establishing individual children's sense of agency in developing their play. Research into brain development is showing that nurture triggers, shapes and influences nature (see Chapter 3). Our environments – social, cultural, physical and material – serve as an extension of our brains, it seems.

Observing free-flow play in action

Tom, aged two years, spent an afternoon cracking a bowl of nuts with two types of nutcracker: a corkscrew model and a pincer model. He was involved in forces, holes and broken parts. He shared this experience with his mother. By the age of three, he was making paper aeroplanes. He was completely fascinated when shown by an older child that he could cut bits off the wing to make flaps, which speed up and slow down flight and vary the direction of the aeroplane. Vygotsky (1978) has emphasised the importance of children spending time with people who are more skilled than they are if learning is to be effectively developed.

During his play, Tom loved to throw sticks into bushes in the garden and into water. He, in Europe, is doing what a group of three children (aged two, four and seven) are doing on the banks of the River Nile in Egypt. They are making boats that will sail in particular directions and float with cargoes. Tom is playing with forces, crashes and splashes, just as they are as they throw sticks and stones into the Nile around the boats that they have made. Free-flow play is happening all over the world. There is a common core of play, which has a universal dimension.

Hannah, at 14, is choreographing a solo dance for her GCSE course. This is the culmination of the dance play she has maintained from the age of ten months, when she began the 'knees bend' swaying to music indulged in by children in cultures throughout the world (Davies, 2003). At six she danced for hours on end with her four-year-old friend, Ming, using dressing-up clothes, music on a tape recorder and homemade instruments, playing at dancing and using everything she knew about dance.