

# 'The place of play in Key Stage 1 classes'

Professor Julie Fisher

*adapted from*

*'Moving On to Key Stage 1' (2<sup>nd</sup> edn) (OUP 2020)*

## **Introduction**

This book unashamedly and passionately advocates for the place of play in Key Stage 1 classes. However, it has to be acknowledged that play is a word that chills the hearts of some headteachers, and senior leaders, particularly those who have never taught young children in their careers. It is often misunderstood by parents, particularly those who think that school is for 'hard work'. It is also sometimes misunderstood by teachers, particularly those who have not been trained to work with this age group or whose training did not acknowledge play as a primary means of optimising learning for children aged five to seven years. But any teacher who wants to offer their children a developmentally sensitive experience in Key Stage 1 needs to understand play, to be knowledgeable about the benefits of play at this age, to be confident about how to plan for and support play, how to enjoy play themselves and how to ensure play is included in their children's daily learning opportunities.

## **What is play?**

Defining play has 'plagued researchers and philosophers for years' (Zosh et al. 2018:1). According to different authors, play has different definitions and draws on many differing theories. However, even if there is no single agreed definition about what play is, there are certain characteristics of play which researchers and writers tend to agree are universal:

- Play is an activity done for its own sake
- The process is more important than the end product or the goal
- Play engenders a sense of agency and control
- Play offers opportunities for creativity and flexibility when objects are put in novel combinations or situations are acted out in new ways

- Play gives children many opportunities to test out their theories of the world and how it works
- Play is enjoyable: children often smile, laugh and will remain engaged in it for long periods of time

According to Mardell et al. (2019:1) there is a solid theoretical and growing research base providing a strong rationale for including play in 'school' as well as early years classes and settings. This evidence points to the fact that:

*When people play they are engaged, relaxed and challenged - states of mind that are highly conducive to learning. They test theories, experiment....explore social relations, take risks and reimagine the world. They develop agency, empathy, imagination and learn to deal with uncertainty.*

So, as these researchers comment: 'Since schools are in the business of learning, it stands to reason that play should have an important place in schools.'

However, while there is consensus about the benefits of play and agreement that play is developmentally advantageous for social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical growth, many teachers continue to believe that play and structured academic learning are mutually exclusive (Allee-Herdon et al. 2019). There is also confusion and certainly some mixed messages about the purposes of play. These centre chiefly on discontinuities between play's existential qualities (play for its own sake) and the educational qualities of play (play for instrumental purposes such as achieving goals) (see Wood and Chesworth 2017). Nevertheless, according to Parker and Thomsen (2019) the notion that learning through play should have an important role in formal educational settings is gaining traction.

### **What does play offer children in Key Stage 1?**

Unsurprisingly, what play offers children in Key Stage 1 aligns closely with what is known from child development (see Chapter 2) about how children learn age five, six and seven years of age.

#### **1. Enjoyment and fun**

The literature about play (e.g. Fisher 1992; Hughes 2010; Robson 2010; Broadhead and Burt 2011; White 2013; Clemens 2010; APPG 2015; Archer and Siraj 2015) as well as the evidence of our own eyes, tell us that five to seven

year old children love to play, and still need to play. We should not let people mock the fact that children, and adults, are 'just playing' (Moyles 1989). Firstly, this enjoyment leads to children being highly motivated to engage in and continue with their play. This motivation, in turn, encourages greater concentration and perseverance (White et al. 2017) because the process and (any) end product is in the hands of the child. Concentration and perseverance are executive functions of the brain (Whitebread 2012) that research suggests are more reliable indicators of academic success and emotional wellbeing than a range of other abilities including early literacy (McClelland et al. 2013). Enjoyment also means that the learner is relaxed – a 'state highly conducive to learning' (Mardell et al. 2019). If children are tense then both their body and their brains are in a state of alert, which may be valuable for self-preservation, but is less useful for learning. When the brain is relaxed it is far more likely to absorb in optimal ways, the experiences, opportunities and teaching that it receives (LeDoux 1998). Lastly, because play makes learning fun and children are more engaged in the process this may, in turn, help decrease the challenging behaviours reported by many Year 1 teachers when children make the move from the EYFS to Key Stage 1 if the latter is a more formal, static, didactic experience (Bredenkamp and Copple 2009). If any of your colleagues need to be convinced that play brings happiness, enjoyment and purpose to children's learning then I suggest that, alongside the evidence of research and evidence from your own advocacy, you direct them to the Carterhatch Primary School 'Year One Happy' video on YouTube and then ask how they can possibly justify removing play from children's learning experiences in Year 1. This video, directed by Anna Ephrave when she was working at the school, is on YouTube and available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yrX7\\_OREPY&t=38s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yrX7_OREPY&t=38s). Sit back, watch and smile.

## ***2. A sense of agency and of wellbeing***

Play supports the foundations of children's wellbeing for life (Howard and McInnes 2012; Allee-Herdon et al. 2019). Researchers have discovered strong statistical correlations between some of the most vulnerable children in our schools and their level of risk when play is absent from their lives and from their learning experiences. When children are living in poverty or come from stressful or chaotic home situations there is now evidence of diminishing capacities in executive function and particularly self-regulation (see Chapter 2) as well as social-emotional development (Copple and Bredenkamp 2009). In school, it is too often

the case that the children who need play the most are those who experience it least – sometimes because they ‘haven’t finished their work’; sometimes because they are removed from playful experiences in the classroom to be tutored in an ‘intervention’ to improve specific skills. It is easy to see how the lack of high-quality play in Key Stage 1 classes compounds the academic, behavioural, and social-emotional challenges in school for the most vulnerable students (Weisberg et al. 2013). Indeed the growing population of high needs children who lack social-emotional skills, self-regulation skills, or executive function skills are especially likely to struggle with behavioral issues in more formal, desk-bound environments (Fisher 1992).

Play is pleasurable (Mardell et al. 2019), and as the pressure of the external outcomes-driven school agenda increases, children - more than ever - need times in their day when play allows them the freedom, the control, the release to do what they choose to do and to follow their own interests and ideas.

Research by Howard and McInnes (2012) concludes that children who approach an activity as play rather than ‘not play’ show greater signs of emotional wellbeing.

### **3. Opportunities for creative and critical thinking**

Early cognition centres on the fact that children play an active role in the construction of knowledge, and that play gives them countless opportunities to do this. The child’s ‘active’ role is not simply in *doing*, it is in *thinking* – which implies mental activity as well as physical activity. Such mental activity demands the active manipulation and processing of information rather than passive rote learning where information is simply to be absorbed (Zosh et al. 2018). Therefore, when children have opportunities to engage in rich play experiences they bring their minds to it as well as their bodies. Play affords children a whole variety of opportunities to use their creative and critical thinking, to solve problems and to use their initiative – all active processes which make learning far more meaningful and purposeful for them. Play involves iterative thinking (experimentation, hypothesis testing, trial and error) (Mardell et al. 2019) and when children discover solutions, information or outcomes for themselves, they have better immediate and long term retention of what is discovered than children who are simply told (Yang and Safto 2017).

#### ***4. The refinement of skills that have been developing since birth***

Because play gives children a sense of agency and control over their activity, it offers Key Stage 1 children opportunities to use their developing skills to good effect. At six and seven years of age children's creativity is burgeoning. This can be seen in role play situations where children take a couple of cardboard boxes and some scarves and create a whole range of imaginative scenarios. Role play often has more complex plots and more organised scripts (Johnson 2006) – many of which are inspired by a story that has been read or a programme or film that has been watched.

At this age too, children's fine motor skills are improving which allows them to engage with construction materials at a more complex level – physically, structurally and creatively (Craft 2003; Moorhouse 2019). Older children often prefer very detailed, realistic models in their play with miniature worlds, and research (Fisher 2010) has shown that for some Key Stage 1 children this is preferred to dressing up as characters themselves. Children in Key Stage 1 have developed increasingly mature social skills. They engage in more cooperative play and refine their social skills as they learn to play in collaboration and negotiation with their peers (Broadhead 2004). Play offers these developmental opportunities in myriad ways which are often limited by a formal, teacher-controlled approach.

#### ***5. The development of skills that will last a life-time***

Many of the skills that children continue to learn through play are those that are rehearsal for the skills they will need throughout their lives. The first of these is flexibility. All that is certain about the future is its uncertainty, and play teaches children to deal with uncertainty in creative ways (Whitehead 2012; Mardell et al. 2019). Because children are motivated to achieve whatever goals they have set themselves (Whitebread 2012) then this sense of agency liberates them to make mistakes without fear, to try alternative, creative solutions, to tear up an idea (figuratively) and simply start again. All of these dispositions will enable a child in the future to have the 'blue-sky' thinking so beloved of business and to develop what Alan Sugar refers to as 'thinking on your feet' (Sugar 2005). The child of the future will also need to interact skilfully with others. Not simply to sit next to them, but to work with them, negotiate with them and create solutions with them. In play, Key Stage 1 children usually choose with whom they collaborate. They see the purpose and the benefit of creating play scenarios together,

frequently drawing on the ideas, the knowledge, the skills of their peers to help them achieve their own planned outcomes. Consequently, they are learning the value of working with others and honing the skills needed to do so not only in the classroom but when they move into the world of work with its increased emphasis on team-work and collaboration.

Finally, through play and the levels of independence it affords, children learn to seek knowledge for themselves rather than being reliant on a teacher to provide challenges and solutions for them (Ward 2016). With the speed of change that is enveloping all western cultures, learning knowledge is of little value, instead we need to be equipping children with the skills to go and find out what they need to know, when they need to know it. Many of these skills are reliant on children's competent use of technology, which should be a central feature of children's playful experiences, drawing on the skills taught in adult-led time. In an interesting article entitled *Children should learn mainly through play until age eight says Lego*, The Guardian reporter Lucy Ward (2016) quotes the head of the Lego foundation, Hanne Rasmussen, as saying that play should be "hands-on, minds-on" and that we should be developing in our children a playful state of mind in which "you are open and try different things and are in a positive flow".

## **6. The consolidation of skills and knowledge learned more formally**

Those who are familiar with a classroom offering developmentally sensitive approaches are able to offer compelling evidence that play is a powerful way in which children learn more about the given curriculum (see case studies below). Play gives children the opportunity to apply the skills and knowledge they have learned in their own self-determined ways. There is justifiable concern over the recent emphasis in government policy on 'knowledge' rather than 'skills'. The importance of skills such as 'creative and critical thinking, and problem-solving' are disputed by authors such as Christodolou (2013) and Hirsch (2017) who maintain that facts should not be seen as 'the enemy of understanding' (Christodolou 2013:17). But knowledge is so much more than facts. In play, children have unending opportunities to *develop* their knowledge (of concepts and skills, not merely facts) and to *apply* their knowledge (of concepts and skills, not merely facts) in ways which adult-led learning often limits. The recent Ofsted School's Handbook (2019) talks about promoting 'knowledge' (para 171); 'embedding and using' knowledge (para 183); 'connecting' knowledge (para 184) and 'consolidate and deepen' knowledge (para 287). All of these opportunities are

apparent in high quality play as children transfer what they have just learned – in both adult-led and child-led contexts - into their long term memory via the constant repetition and rehearsal of new and existing understandings. In this less pressurised context, children practice skills they have been taught; they absorb and make sense of new concepts they have learned; they take on new roles which they have read about. Because play has no prescribed outcome, the child is free to impose whatever outcomes they choose. They can have a go at something and, if it doesn't work out, they can change the goalposts. They can try something out and keep repeating and rehearsing it until they get it right – according to their own criteria and in their own time. High quality play, when it is appropriately resourced, gives children the opportunity for the repetition, consolidation and deepening that children of this age still desperately need. There is a danger that Next-Steps-itis pushes children ever-onward when they have not grasped the skill or level of understanding that has gone before. If we push children on before they are ready then we are building their development on shaky ground, and if that is the case then at some point in the future we are setting them up for failure.

The following are some lovely examples from Year 1 and Year 2 teachers of how the curriculum is spontaneously revisited and rehearsed in play.

#### **Case study 4.1**

Children had been read the book *On the Trail of the Whale* by Camilla de la Bedoyere. Later in the day a group spontaneously used everyday materials in the creative area (which is setup as part of the continuous provision) to make a trap to catch fish for the whale. The children used their design and technology skills as well as scientific experimentation – testing and revising – to make their traps, revisiting the book frequently, to get details accurate.

#### **Case study 4.2**

The class had been talking about the weather before they went off to continue their own learning. One of the children poured water through a sieve at the top of a piece of guttering and it flowed down to the bottom into a bucket. The child exclaimed it was 'rain' and the gutter was like a 'river'. She then went and filled the jug from the bucket and poured it through again. Following these actions the child and the teacher had a very long conversation about the water cycle and other children came across to listen. Several children then went off and made their own artwork of the water cycle and labelled it themselves. Another child

then showed the teacher her work and asked "So how do you make a rainbow?" The teacher decided to get out some glass lenses prisms and show her but the child was also curious about the lenses themselves, having never seen them before. She made the rainbow using a torch and the prism and then began to investigate the lenses. Through trial and error she found she could make some images larger and some smaller.

#### **Case Study 4.3**

Children had been learning about measurement. In the continuous provision were a range of strong, clear plastic cups that children used to build towers and other structures. Two children independently chose to build a pyramid structure. The structure came close to the height of one of the children. Unprompted, the children began to discuss whether the structure was taller or shorter than each of them using mathematical vocabulary to compare heights with confidence. One child then independently self-selected a meter stick. Both children were able to compare the height of the structure to the meter stick. Child X commented that it was taller than a meter as the meter stick is shorter. Measuring continued for some time without the teacher once saying "Who or what is the tallest do you think?"

#### **Case Study 4.4**

A small group of children were playing with wooden blocks. In the block area, the teacher had left a selection of photographs showing famous bridges from around the world. The children decided to try and create Tower Bridge in London and also Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. A map of the world is also positioned next to the block play area. Two of the children then went over to the map and located the United Kingdom. They then found America and began talking about how they would get from the UK to America and discussing the time it would take.

### **The development of life skills: the views of industry and commerce**

As I explained above, play offers children opportunities to develop life skills that they will never learn – or have the opportunity to develop – if they experience a learning day that is entirely dictated by the teacher and where they have little or no opportunities to flex their own self-directed learning muscles. No-one knows what is 'the best that must be taught' to children in terms of knowledge for the future. But as we will see below, many influential leaders from the world of work believe it is the essential and transferable skills learned through play that will best

prepare children for the unpredictable world in which they are growing up. The skills and dispositions to be lifelong learners are far more crucial than endless knowledge and facts which will always be readily accessible at their fingertips when necessary. Whilst this may be obvious to those of us working with young children it is helpful that we are reassured by others who recognise the importance of these skills and dispositions for adult life.

In a speech to the Association of School and College Leaders in Birmingham, Paul Drechsler, President of the CBI, said:

*Of course, academic achievement matters. But alone it's not enough for the exciting world we face – in work, or in wider society....Attainment and wider preparation for life go hand-in-hand' (Dreschler 2018).*

In similar vein, in an article entitled *Thoughts, Insights and Words of Wisdom* (Jones 2019), Chris Jones, Chief Executive at City and Guilds, is quoted as saying:

*Unfortunately, some people believe that soft skills\* aren't that important. However, almost every employer I've ever talked to about this disagrees. In a world where job roles are changing rapidly, soft skills will be one of the few constants.*

*(\* soft skills = communication; teamwork; decision-making; problem-solving; empowerment; empathy)*

In his recent book, Ellis (2020) quotes James Dyson, the CEO of Dyson Ltd:

*Now, in schools, we don't teach children to be creative. We don't teach them to experiment. We want them to fill in the right answer, tick the right answer in the box.*

Finally, in an informative and useful list of references to the values of various leaders of commerce and industry (see Carberry 2015), McDonald's quote Neil Carberry, the Director for Employment and Skills at the CBI as saying:

*Business is clear that developing the right attitudes and attributes in people – such as resilience, respect, enthusiasm and creativity – is just as important as academic or technical skills. In an ever more competitive jobs market it is such qualities that will give our young talent a head start and also allow existing employees to progress to higher skilled, better paid roles.*

In support of these influential people from the world of work, the World Economic Forum (2020) in an article for the Journal *Human Resources*, identified ten skills they believe young people need, to thrive in 2020:

1. Complex problem solving
2. Critical thinking.
3. Creativity.
4. People management
5. Coordinating with others.
6. Emotional intelligence.
7. Judgment and decision making.
8. Service orientation.
9. Negotiation.
10. Cognitive flexibility.

A certain well-known British entrepreneur (Sugar 2005) identifies many of the attributes of play, in his books about developing business partners:

- self-belief
- originality and creativity
- managing time
- persistence
- reinventing the rules
- communication skills
- imagination and thinking big
- flexibility
- hunger for the next challenge
- thinking on your feet
- negotiation skills
- courage

I sometimes think many of our nursery school children could teach some of Alan Sugar's would-be Apprentices a thing or two.

### **What skills and dispositions does play develop?**

The skills and dispositions above are not those currently prized by a politicised agenda that increasingly favours 'instructional' learning and knowledge, paying little attention to research that suggests this is (a) outmoded (b) limiting. But the most compelling case for play in Key Stage 1 remains that it encourages the development of attitudes and dispositions that children need and can use throughout life (Claxton and Carr 2004; Elkind 2007; Mardell et al. 2019). Adult-led learning may teach new skills, new concepts, new facts but some of these become redundant as children get older. And whilst it is crucial that children are introduced to ideas, knowledge and skills that they might never come upon if left

to their own devices, these are not sufficient as an education for life. An education for life demands attitudes and approaches to learning which an adult-directed curriculum can never provide on its own.

Having asked thousands of teachers over the past ten years about the benefits of play for their Key Stage 1 children, I feel I now have a pretty comprehensive, universal list. This is evidence. The evidence of the eyes of professionals who work with Key Stage 1 children day in and day out. I respect this evidence and only wish some of our senior leaders and politicians did likewise. As you read through the list, perhaps ask yourself - why would anyone want to stop children developing these skills and dispositions all the way through their primary schooling?

### **Approaches, Skills and Dispositions that play develops**

#### **Approaches**

Following their own interests and fascinations  
Having fun  
Being relaxed  
Being involved and engaged

#### **Skills**

Problem-solving  
Using initiative  
Thinking creatively and critically  
Collaborating  
Cooperating  
Negotiating  
Deploying 'trial and error'

#### **Dispositions**

Gaining in confidence  
Developing a sense of agency and empowerment  
Being motivated  
Staying curious  
Being independent  
Being flexible  
Developing resilience  
Concentrating

Persevering when things get tricky  
Being prepared to take risks  
Developing empathy  
Seeing mistakes as learning opportunities

### **Supporting high-quality play**

In order to ensure high quality play, teachers should spend as much time **observing** play as they do any other learning activity in their classroom. Through observation, teachers will notice skills that a child has, or understandings or theories that they are trying out, that would never be seen in a more adult-planned context. Observation of children at play is a perfectly legitimate *adult-led* activity but, in order to make the most of observation, teachers have to take time to interpret and understand children's meanings and intentions and not just look for evidence of learning outcomes that are curriculum-focused (see more in Chapter 8).

Then adults can **facilitate** play, by introducing resources that might stimulate children's thinking and imagination. These resources might be part of the 'continuous provision' in the classroom (see Chapter 6), part of the every day environment that is there for children to return to over and over again as they test out and consolidate their learning. However, the teacher also facilitates new experiences - either to 'kick off' a play episode, or to extend the possibilities once a play episode has been going on for some time. This latter contribution is made with great subtlety, because there is a fine line between interacting in children's play and interfering with it (Fisher 2016).

The golden rule of thumb in Key Stage 1 is that if children take no notice of your intervention, then it probably wasn't a necessary or helpful one. Even 'extending' play can seem like a take-over bid to children, and older children in particular are very clear about the intentions of their play, and whether an adult is helping or merely getting in the way.

**Examples of adults 'getting in the way' of children's play**

**Case study 4.1:** "I had put all the small world fairy tale characters on a story mat and a group of girls played for a considerable time – firstly creating an imaginary 'world' and then going into character. After about 20 minutes I went across to join in the play and silently, without talking to each other, they picked up the characters and took them somewhere else in the classroom where they continued their storying"

**Case study 4.2:** "I had turned the class 'shop' back into a home corner to see if this encouraged a greater range of children to come into role play. There were 5 children playing there sorting out who was cooking and who was going to be the baby. I thought the play needed some direction so I went into the area and asked for a cup of tea. Every single one of the children left and I was left sitting on my own!"

**Case study 4.3:** "I was watching four boys building some highly complex structures in the block area. I could see all sorts of possibilities for consolidating their mathematical language. So I went and sat alongside them and asked questions about the shapes they were using, the dimensions of the structures and their relative size. One of the boys turned to me and, very politely said, 'I don't really think this is helping us'...so I left!"

But sensitive adults *can* become **involved** in play. This is a particularly skilled role for the adult, especially where six and seven year olds are concerned because children are becoming increasingly sociable and co-operative in their play and are beginning to develop play themes with their peers and to share an understanding of goals to their play that they have set themselves (see Broadhead 2004 for an interesting exposition of the social dimensions of play).

As I watch DVD footage of Key Stage 1 children playing and learning together, and the attempts of adults to become involved in children's play, it becomes apparent that as they become six and seven years of age children grow to depend on other children for the quality of their play, rather than depending on an adult. This is not to suggest that the adult should never become involved in the play of Key Stage 1 children – but the role changes. The children do not need an 'audience' in the way that they did when they were three or four years old. They do not need a 'play-mate' as often, because they use each other to fill that role. Sometimes though, they need a helping hand or someone to fetch something that

they are too preoccupied to fetch and someone to share the excitement of their discoveries. But, by-and large, the adult in Key Stage 1 becomes someone who needs to be invited into a play scenario on the children's own terms and to be seen as a co-player who is known and trusted to enhance the children's enjoyment rather than to highjack the play for her own devices.

### **What play does NOT teach**

Whilst play is undoubtedly a necessary way in which children should be learning in Key Stage 1, it is important to reiterate that it is not the *only* way. It is quite obvious that with an increasingly prescriptive curriculum, particularly around certain aspects of literacy and mathematics, that play is not the most suitable or effective vehicle for learning. We have just seen that it can be invaluable for the rehearsal and consolidation of skills already taught, but there are certain skills and concepts that children in Key Stage 1 will not learn simply by follow their own interests.

So the question is....what *won't* play teach? Just as it is vital to know and understand what play can teach (see everything above!), it is equally important to 'recognise play's potential without romanticising it' (McLane 2003). The list below was compiled by two experienced Key Stage 1 teachers. Those reading this book may come up with a different list, but the important thing is to consider, for yourself, firstly what play can *teach*, and then what it may *consolidate*.

#### **What play does *not* teach**

##### *Phonics*

- Graphemes: the letters used to represent phonemes
- Analytical phonics: starting with spoken words, segment into individual sounds and convert to letters (spelling)
- Synthetic phonics: start with letters, convert to sounds and blend to produce words (reading)

##### *Handwriting*

- Pencil grip
- Letter formation- needs to be done early and in very small groups so they do not develop the wrong formation and begin to apply it independently
- Writing on the line

- Joining letters (after formation is taught)

#### *Mathematics*

- Calculating
- Teaching specific strategies e.g. addition, starting with the biggest number and counting on, that addition and multiplication is commutative
- Use the resources effectively to solve problems e.g- number line, 10 frame, hundred square etc.
- Learning the times tables (multiples of 2, 5 and 10s)
- Teaching time
- Place Value : linking numbers to resources e.g. use of *Dienes* for tens and ones
- Introducing the place value columns and how this denotes the value of a number

#### *History*

- Facts about specific events/ people e.g. The Wright Brothers
- Events, people and places in the local area
- Using sources to find specific information

#### *Geography*

- Key physical and human features, and corresponding vocabulary (unless you can take them out to a beach, cliff, coast, farm...)

#### *Skills*

- Woodwork: use of saw, hammer, screwdriver, drill
- Physical: how to do a forward roll safely; how to 'land' with greater safety

As I have said earlier in this chapter, these skills and understandings may well be rehearsed, consolidated and deepened in play activity. However, they are not likely to be learnt – and certainly not in a systematic way - if, at some point or other, they have not been taught more formally or learned through 'apprenticeship' (Rogoff 1990) alongside a more skilled other.

### **Play and more able learners**

One belief about play provision that I have noted in discussions with teachers in Key Stage 1 is that play is necessary in classrooms only for younger or less able children. For those who are not yet developmentally mature and 'ready' for the more formal learning that can characterise the Year 1 curriculum. It is so important to understand that this is simply not the case. The skills and dispositions that we have seen in the paragraphs above are crucial for all children, and evidence from my own research (Fisher 2010) is that in Year 1 and Year 2 classes, play is often seen at its most powerful and effective as a vehicle for learning for the *most* able.

Just because a child is very able, in terms of literacy for example, it does not necessarily follow that they have well developed social or emotional skills. One teacher reported that her able autumn born girls – those who regularly sat at the front of the class carpet with their hands up - simply could not manage the cut-and-thrust of more independent activity. They squabbled and sulked and needed support to learn to live with and play with others positively and effectively. One of the great assets of playing together, and being independent of adults, is that children learn the social skills needed in situations that a teacher might sanitise too quickly.

For example, when children play together they have to learn to put forward their own ideas and sometimes have them rejected; they have to learn to listen to the ideas of others and go along with them even if it isn't their preferred option; they need to learn to argue their corner, to be more assertive, to compromise and to co-operate. If, in a teacher-led situation, children were to start on the kind of interactions that you often hear as they play together – the squabbling, sometimes the use of bad language, the attitudes and the recriminations – then the teacher would probably step in to try and smooth things over. But in these real-life play situations, the skills of collaboration and co-operation are more genuinely learned than in, say, a whole class circle time when 'being nice to others' is the topic of a decontextualised debate.

Another characteristic of more able children is that they are sometimes so used to doing well that they do not cope well with mistakes or 'failure'. Carol Dweck's influential work (e.g. 2000) reveals that this is particularly true of 'bright girls' (Licht and Dweck 1984) who, when put in situations that were unfamiliar and caused cognitive 'confusion' were thrown, and did not learn as well as predicted.

The confidence of more able children is, in many circumstances, a predictor of successful academic outcomes. But Dweck's research suggests that this is not the case when more able children are facing difficulty, when they are faced with *not* knowing the answers or are faced with a problem that is not easily solved. In these situations their confidence can crumble and they find it hard to manage the situation. Dweck (2000:52) suggests that it is 'not so much the confidence you bring to a situation, as the ability to maintain a confident stance...in the face of obstacles'. One of the benefits of play is that it teaches all children to see setbacks as challenges not disasters and to enjoy using their ingenuity and creativity to solve problems. As teachers provide for increasingly provocative and intriguing challenges and resources in their classrooms, they have been amazed to see their more able children struggle. Yet, once play becomes an everyday opportunity within the learning day, these same children begin to use their initiative and to work beyond what had previously been perceived to be their capabilities. In play there is no imposed ceiling on what a child knows or can do, so children can explore their own potential at the very edges of their individual experience, ingenuity and imagination. Hill and Wood (2019) suggest that play offers a reconceptualising of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) in that, when engaged in play, children reveal what is proximal for *them*, rather than their learning being constrained by and in the hands of more knowledgeable and, therefore, powerful others (Daniels 2016).

It is so important that, if children are more able, and if they show that they are competent in more formal skills and knowledge, that we do not 'reward' them by constraining their learning experiences to what is written, static and adult directed. The joy of a developmentally sensitive approach is that it is responsive to *all* children in the class. Just as a more able child may need play in order to extend their social and interpersonal skills and to enhance their ability to think for themselves and solve problems, so a child who is less able (by conventional measures), or has special needs, benefits from this way of working also. Children with special needs thrive on approaches that are flexible and adaptable to their strengths and responsive to their interests. When the whole class learns in the same way – and especially at the same time – it is these children who may struggle to keep up and are often in danger of losing self-esteem. A developmentally sensitive approach enables children whose learning styles, approaches and strengths differ from their peers to find different places and contexts in which to thrive. To engage in learning at a pace that doesn't overwhelm them. To have the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities in areas

of the classroom that may be less formal and more play-based. To give adults quality time, throughout the learning day, to spend with them as individuals. Whatever children's learning needs, a developmentally sensitive approach means adults have the time and the opportunities to tune into them; to respond in ways that are individual rather than uniform; to scaffold according to need rather than age and to provide what is relevant and meaningful for *all* children.

### **Introducing play into a Key Stage 1 classroom**

Very often, for teachers who are not used to planning for or using play as part of children's learning day, then getting going can be the hardest step. The important thing to remember is that high quality play does not materialise over night. Even experienced teachers find they have to try out resources, reorganise the classroom space, learn when and how to intervene over a considerable period of time before they feel that what they are providing for their children brings about play that is truly rich in learning potential.

In the current educational climate it is difficult to argue for time for the *adult* to play. There is such an emphasis on planned outcomes, and results that have to be immediate and visible 'now'. This outcomes culture is, of course, an anathema to creative and developmental teaching. All good teachers know that to become good at anything takes time, space, trial and error. If teachers are not allowed periods of trial and error then there will be no growth. Teaching will remain safe and predictable and no-one will have the courage to try things out that might initially go wrong.

And yet only from experimentation – and mistakes – comes innovation. If schools insist on repeating the same learning formats, children's experiences will become more and more routine and repetitious, even when it is clear they are neither satisfactory nor maximising children's learning potential. In order to develop practice, teachers need to be given permission to introduce play, and the time it takes to try out, refine and improve environments, resources and challenges within the environment that will ultimately sustain the highest quality play and consequent learning.

Poor quality play is usually caused by the misunderstandings of adults. Some of these misunderstandings are as follows:

#### **Misunderstandings about play**

1. *Children are given opportunities to 'play' on one afternoon a week.*

'Golden Time' will never develop play of high quality. When play is kept as something special - rather than a key way in which children learn each day - then play is seen only as a 'carrot' for getting finished the more important work of the teacher. Play has so much more value than this and needs to be utilised so that children learn all of the skills and dispositions that this chapter has outlined whilst, at the same time, giving opportunities for the spontaneous consolidation of learning that has taken place in more adult-led literacy, geography, science lessons also.

In addition, 'Golden Time' means that children don't see play as a central part of their everyday learning opportunities. They are more likely to get over-excited when the lid is taken off the teacher dominated agenda and they have the chance to follow their own interests. Teachers very often report that behaviour during 'Golden Time' is very poor, that children are too loud and exuberant. This stands to reason. If children are deprived of something, they get over-excited when they *can* have it. The fact that children anticipate and are 'allowed' to have fun for a short period of time means that, rather like at birthday parties, behaviour gets hyped up and the quality of the play actually deteriorates.

2. *Children don't have long enough in the day to develop play that is of good quality*

If you talk to most early childhood specialists they will say that *high quality* play doesn't often emerge from the start of a play episode. This is supported by Broadhead's research (2004) which demonstrates that children need time for play to develop in social complexity, and to result in more challenging social and cognitive outcomes. It can sometimes take around 20-30 minutes for children to become completely immersed in their play and to find something that they want to create or to pursue. At the beginning of play episodes children are more likely to 'play around with' materials and resources (especially if they are not familiar with them). Then they are likely to play around with ideas and possibilities whilst they find something that appeals to them. All the while they are likely to be talking to, arguing with, negotiating with the friends with whom they are playing in order to settle on something that interests them all. All of this takes time. If children are only given 10 minutes before lunch-time, or 20 minutes within a

'carousel' of activities before they are moved on, then play will never develop beyond the superficial 'playing around' stage. Of course, there are times when children who are used to playing together can pick up a well-loved play theme and get into their play more quickly. There are times when play resources are so well known and used – such as blocks or water – that play develops more quickly. But often, the kind of play that draws on new ideas, that involves exploring the possibilities of new resources, that demands the most innovative and imaginative ideas, takes time to develop and must be given time if it is to be of the quality that makes it worthy of a constant place in the classroom.

### *3. Resources are inadequate to support the play that children want to engage in*

Very often when I speak to Key Stage 1 teachers they complain that they do not have the level of resourcing that is enjoyed by teachers in the Foundation Stage. They feel they cannot introduce play of good quality because their resources are simply not adequate. Whilst it is true that money needs to be invested in a play-based learning environment (see Chapter 6 for ideas and suggestions) it is reassuring to note that many of the resources that appeal to resourceful, imaginative five to seven year olds are completely free! Teachers who have been working in developmentally sensitive ways for some time almost always say how they have learned to be assertive in asking for 'cast-offs' and less inhibited about looking out for resources that other people have thrown away. Many of the teachers in the Oxfordshire Transition Project (Fisher 2010) were won over by their children's creative response to large cardboard boxes (from the purchase of fridges or freezers for example); empty shoe boxes; old plastic milk crates; pieces of material from ends of rolls; the inserts to rolls of carpets; old hose pipes or guttering etc. As important as funding, is teacher ingenuity and imagination in seeing the playful possibilities in every day things, in gathering them up and in trying them out.

### *4. Teachers don't observe play often enough to have evidence of children learning*

A further barrier to the development of good quality play is that teachers do not observe it often enough to have evidence of its powerful contribution to learning. If you have not experienced something, it can be difficult to believe that it has the worth that others suggest. Many teachers will talk – in interviews if no-where else – about the value of play and its place in the classroom. But, in reality, play is then assigned to the edges of children's learning, given adult outcomes (see

above) or not introduced at all. If the theory about how children learn and your own experience of children playing outside the school environment, or in the Foundation Stage, has given you a glimmer of understanding that play is something worth exploring further, then you just need to start... and observe what happens.

Once play is observed regularly, teachers begin to see more readily the learning taking place. They begin to see things about individual children that they hadn't noticed when they were learning in more formal situations. They see competences, characteristics and dispositions that do not emerge when an adult is directing all the learning. They begin to see how the organisation of the learning environment impacts on the quality of what children are doing. All of this invaluable information is then fed back into planning for the next steps of children's learning and gives the teacher a heightened resolve to continue with play in their classroom – and to improve it.

##### *5. Teachers abandon children's play so do not learn how to interact to enhance its quality*

As I have suggested earlier, interacting in children's play can be fraught with dangers. It is all too easy to say the wrong thing at the wrong time (we've all done it) and to stop the play dead in its tracks. If a teacher has not understood what is motivating children's play, if they have not taken the time to understand what the children are trying to achieve, then it can mean that any intervention may be ill-judged and, far from extending children's thinking and learning, will interfere with it. Children have their own learning momentum. If they are deeply engaged in a play episode they will have their own intentions and their own goals. If the teacher does not tune into these, then any intervention will hinder learning and not help it. Observation is the key to good intervention. Knowing when to step in – indeed, *whether* to step in – relies on having tuned in to what children are thinking and trying to do. This does not mean never engaging in children's play at all for fear of getting it wrong. But experience, and experiences, teach us all to be more skilful at suggesting something, introducing something that takes play to new levels. But unless we develop our role in the ways described earlier in the chapter (and in Chapter 7), children will see play as less important in the eyes of the teacher because the teacher never stops by to see what is going on.

**Steps to introducing play into the Key Stage 1 classroom**

1. Gather open ended play resources that children can use for their own creative ideas (if you're not sure where to start go and look at a good Foundation Stage class to start with)
2. Give play time and space in the classroom. Don't interrupt it with any adult-led teaching and see what happens
3. Once a play episode has established itself, go and observe at a distance to see what children are learning. Don't interfere unless children invite you in
4. Use what you have learned through observation to plan for further play opportunities and for adult-led learning
5. Go on courses about play, read about play, go and see play in good nursery and Foundation Stage environments
6. Use what you have learned to improve your skills in supporting and extending and providing for play

## Conclusions

The place of play in Key Stage 1 should now be assured. We have seen that it is one of the most powerful and motivating ways in which children age five to seven years old learn, a view supported in the final report of the *Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum* (DCSF 2009a):

Play is not a trivial pursuit. Drawing on a robust evidence base, the interim report highlighted the importance of learning through play.... The purposes of play in promoting learning and development should be made explicit and planned opportunities made to fulfil them in the primary curriculum. (The Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum 2009: para 4.49)

However, for play to be of the quality necessary to be given classroom space (on the timetable as well as in the room) it must be given the status it deserves – both by children and by teachers. Children need time to develop play that has depth and that has purpose. Teachers need time to observe and extend the play through carefully judged interventions – be they verbal or physical. Senior leaders need to have realistic and achievable expectations of formal 'recorded' work so that adaptations to the timetable are allowed in order to build in

extended time for child initiated play. The most important message is that, without play in Key Stage 1 classes, teachers will only ever see one facet of their children's learning. With opportunities to follow their own interests and manage their own outcomes, many children will show that they have far more potential than may previously have been recognised or appreciated.