

Chapter 9

The Politics of Play in England: An Appeal to the Houses of Parliament

Pat Broadhead

Abstract This chapter reports the work of a group of English play scholars who took the case for playful learning in educational settings for young children to the Houses of Parliament, London, in 2008. The chapter aims to show how, within policy, play remains rooted in a moribund political-policy history that privileges adults as ‘constructors of play experiences’. However, on a more optimistic note, it shows how ‘little victories’ might have repercussions in the ongoing sociopolitical play debates to privilege children as active orchestrators of their own playful learning experiences in educational settings. The chapter also describes the role of an Early Years Children’s Champion.

Keywords Play • Playful learning • Playful pedagogies • Play policy • Early years curriculum • Play research • Houses of parliament • TACTYC • Early years children’s champion

Introduction

In England, the term ‘early years’ has encompassed different age ranges. Within the current climate and for the purposes of this paper, it relates to the age range birth to 5 years, the period covered by the related curriculum, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

This chapter describes how a group of early years educators and play scholars took their case for widening opportunities for young children to experience playful learning in educational settings to the House of Commons, within the Houses of Parliament in London, England. The Houses of Parliament are comprised of two

P. Broadhead (✉)
Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK
e-mail: P.Broadhead@leedsmet.ac.uk

chambers: the House of Commons (where the case was made) is the first chamber. The House of Lords is the second chamber of the UK Parliament. The House of Lords is independent from, but complements the work of, the House of Commons. Members of the Lords play a role in making laws and keeping an eye on the decisions and actions of Government and Opposition who are based in the House of Commons. The House of Commons comprises 650 Members of Parliament (MPs) elected by their constituents to represent their interests and concerns. MPs consider and propose new laws and can scrutinise government policies by asking ministers questions about current issues either in the Commons Chamber or in Committees.

The group of educators and play scholars did not proceed into the chamber of the House of Commons but exercised their rights by liaising with an elected MP to call a meeting within a committee room of the Houses of Parliament. To this they invited politicians, policymakers and other influential and interested individuals, some of whom represented national groups concerned with issues for children.

The focus for our representations to Parliament was play and learning for young children in early education settings and was borne of a deepening concern that play was diminishing and in danger of disappearing from the early education agenda in a prevailing political and policy climate that emphasised formal learning over and above children's rights to be independent decision-makers, through playful exploration and engagement in high-quality early years settings.

The journey to the Houses of Parliament began from the discussions and deliberations of the Executive Steering Group of an early years organisation named TACTYC which is explained in further detail later in the chapter. The journey progressed through to a research colloquium focussing specifically on play and learning in educational settings. This colloquium was held at Leeds Metropolitan University in England, where the author of this chapter was then working. As far as we know, this play colloquium was the first of its kind in England. We went from the play colloquium onto the Houses of Parliament and then produced a related publication: *Play and Learning in the Early Years: From Research to Practice* (Broadhead et al. 2010). As we say in England, 'Big trees from little acorns grow'!

Care and Education in the Early Years in England

There is a complex picture of childcare and educational provision for children between birth and 5 years in England. This has developed from historical antecedents. Day care provision grew during the 1930s from social service funding, usually available for families on low income where the mother needed to work or where children were deemed to be 'at risk' in some way. Educational provision expanded most substantially from the 1960s onwards usually in the form of nursery classes attached to primary schools (for children aged 5–11 years) or educationally funded nursery schools (for children aged 2/3–5 years). There was significant and unprecedented expansion and a combining of the care/education ethos under the New Labour Government between the years 1997 and 2010. During this era, billions of

pounds were invested in the development of universal provision, with the intention of locating a Sure Start Children’s Centre in every neighbourhood with services for children aged from 6 months to 4 years. Due to a range of new policy initiatives, this funding diminished rapidly under the Coalition Government elected in 2010. The Coalition Government came about because the Conservative Government did not have a sufficient majority, postelection, to take power and so formed an alliance with the Liberal Democrat party. From 2011 onwards, the Coalition introduced sweeping cuts across many public sector services including those for children and families. There has been and continues to be considerable public dismay and protest at the diminishing of these vital services for children and families including Sure Start Children’s Centres. There is growing recognition of and evidence from across the world that early access to high-quality early education and care provides young children, particularly those from low-income and second-language groups, with a good start in life (OECD 2006). Within the UK, a major, longitudinal study has also shown the impact of high-quality early years education on children’s longer-term achievements and well-being (Sylva et al. 2010).

In England, as in many other countries, provision for children and families is subject to political manipulations in times of economic hardship and is influenced by the state’s view of motherhood as a cultural phenomenon (Vandenbroeck 2003) and by variations in private sector provision as a direct result of economic downturns (Dillon et al. 2001). Because playful activity has a tradition of sitting at the heart of provision for young children, this too becomes subject to the whims of politicians and so to cultural influences through the policy provision of the day. A forthcoming section will focus a little more on how play has ebbed and flowed in early years curriculum policy in England. First of all, however, the TACTYC organisation, as the one that spearheaded the journey to the Houses of Parliament, is briefly introduced.

What Is TACTYC and Why the Interest in Play?

TACTYC is an Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators. Whilst the word ‘TACTYC’ was once an acronym, this is now no longer active. The following extract from the website (www.tactyc.org.uk) gives a succinct overview of its origins and its clear intentions, as an organisation, to work in the best interests of its members and of young children’s rights:

TACTYC was founded in 1978 by a group of early years teacher trainers who recognised how isolated they were feeling in their work and how supportive and developmental it could be to come together with others in a similar position on a regular basis. Today, TACTYC has broadened its base to welcome people from a wide range of early years’ backgrounds, early years researchers, education consultants and professionals working with children and families in day-care, education, health, play work and social service contexts and TACTYC also warmly welcomes students from across these areas.

One key theme that unifies the work of all these professionals is upholding the right of every child to receive a high quality educational experience wherever they are, in an early

years setting. At TACTYC, we would maintain that a high quality educational experience comes from well-trained practitioners who are themselves able to access on-going professional development throughout their working lives. Providing high quality educational experiences for young children can almost be said to be a lifetime's work! Learning is a complex business and young learners are at the cutting edge of learning; they deserve the best we can offer.

TACTYC identifies advocacy and lobbying as part of its core business, and the Executive enter the policy-linked and political arenas on behalf of the members and in relation to sustaining a high-quality experience for children. The website continues:

... providing a voice for all those engaged with the professional development of practitioners through responding to early years policy initiatives and contributing to the debate on the education and training of the UK early years workforce.

During the period 2006/2007, a number of related initiatives began to cause considerable concern amongst the wider early years community in England, including TACTYC. These concerns related to the emerging demise of play from the educational experiences of young children. This aspect is addressed in further detail in the next section. These concerns were clearly not only arising in England. Other authors globally were expressing similar concerns. Miller and Almon (2009) in the USA were writing of the need to restore child-initiated play to the kindergarten and to recognise its status in relation to children's learning. In New Brunswick, Canada, a new curriculum was being devised with the intention of putting play and playfulness back at the heart of the early experiences of children in care and education settings (Early Childhood Research and Development Team 2008). In relation to playful engagements by and with children, Pramling-Samuelsson and Fler (2006) show similarities and differences across five international early years curricula and the influences of local and cultural conditions; whilst they do not look specifically at how playful learning is conceptualised in these curricula, they do illustrate how such curricula as Te Whariki (New Zealand) and Reggio Emilia (Italy), just as with the New Brunswick example, are building practitioner policy appropriation around a starting point of children's perspectives and experiences, rather than a starting point of adult-led activity – an inevitable norm in a centralised curriculum of the kind we were experiencing in England from 1988 onwards when a National Curriculum was introduced for children aged from 5 to 16 years.

A Brief Overview on the Organisation of Early Learning in England and the Growing Concerns Around the Diminishing of Play in Educational Settings

The Desirable Learning Outcomes (DLOs) were published as part of an overall Nursery Education Scheme (DfEE 1996); these provided the first early years curriculum for the age range in England. This was a slim policy publication designed

to inform the curricular experiences of children aged 3–5 years. It identified recommended achievements and skills of children by the time they entered compulsory education which is the beginning of the term after the term in which they are five in England. These Desirable Learning Outcomes were grouped around six areas of learning that, give or take changes in some wording, have remained the same since 1996 and are as follows: Personal and Social Development, Language and Literacy, Knowledge and Understanding of the World, Mathematics, Physical Development and Creative Development. They took their direction and structure from the organisational structure for the curriculum for older children.

Play is barely mentioned in this document except for some examples of adult-led activity that might be deemed to have playful undertones but to be very adult initiated and directed. The DLOs were narrow and prescriptive, and the nature of the child's day-to-day experiences was not considered. However, hindsight has revealed that these documents set a tone within early years policy speak within which it was deemed acceptable to virtually ignore the benefits and entitlements of playful learning except as a vehicle for curriculum delivery by adults.

In 2000 in England, the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS) (QCA 2000), also for children aged 3–5 years included one page on 'Play' (p. 25) calling it 'a key way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge'. There are four bullet points to support the role of the practitioner and eight bullet points to illustrate how play is linked to learning and development. The 'Stepping Stones' for each of the six areas of learning provided an inevitably, overly simplistic notion of progression for young learners, and the guidance to practitioners depicted the adult as leading the learning though questioning, activity provision, modelling, encouraging, displaying, etc. (The areas of learning are the same six as for the DLOs with 'Emotional' added to 'Personal and Social Development' and 'Communication' added to 'Language and Literacy'.)

As with the previous policy document, the tone of the CGFS also implies that all learning for young children follows on from interactions with adults and makes no consideration of the learning potential of playful experiences as initiated and sustained by children themselves either alone or with peers. Essentially, the CGFS was designed to ensure that all providers registered with their local authorities in order to receive the nursery grant and also formed the basis for inspection. The nursery grant funding came down from government to local authorities to provide, for the first time in England, access to free provision for 3- and 4-year-olds, initially for 12 h and then for 15 h a week. It was a significant policy initiative and represented the first free entitlement to provision for this age group. Settings, which received the funding, were accounted through their curriculum provision by providing a checklist of accountability for auditing inspectors. As the CGFS was introduced, so too was the developing documentation on Profiling and Assessing children by the end of the Foundation Stage (DfES 2003), discussed in the next paragraph. This is the end of the child's 'reception year' (the child's fifth year); an anomalous, 'in-between' year in English primary schools, which is neither nursery education nor the period of statutory schooling.

The Foundation Stage Profile (DfES 2003) was finalised in 2008 to complement the then current curriculum documentation, the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF 2007) (EYFS) which had replaced the CGFS. The EYFS does take a more extended view of play than any previous early years policy documentation, offering a more substantial section than did the CGFS, but still no more than a page. However, it does state very clearly that ‘play underpins the delivery of all the EYFS’. It also states that ‘play underpins all development and learning for young children’ – a highly contestable statement and undoubtedly unproven. For example, conversations are not ‘play’ and children surely learn from these. It may seem dogmatic to emphasise one phrase; the intention is however to illustrate how the relative paucity of content conveys a dangerously limited understanding of the complexities of play at policy level and the inherent dangers of policy impact over the next 20 years if there is a continued ignoring of playful learning and playful pedagogies as complex practices built upon complex concepts. In addition, other related statements are similarly simplistic. The exemplification of the developmental milestones across the areas of provision are less adult-centric than in CGFS but frame pedagogical guidance under the far more restrictive and narrower terms of ‘Planning and Resourcing’. Some attempts are made to acknowledge young children as autonomous learners, but there is still a marked tendency to suppose that significant learning will only take place in the company of adults insofar as playful activity is involved.

Throughout this period of curricular changes, there were other aspects of policy that were seen as directly impacting on the demise of play in early years settings in England and so were being raised as areas of significant concern at TACTYC’s Executive discussions and across its membership. From 1998 onwards, large numbers of 4- and 5-year-olds were finding themselves subject to extensive periods of passive, teacher-directed activity as the emphasis on literacy and numeracy acquisition became increasingly prominent in the school-based curriculum for 6- and 7-year-olds. School Inspectors, known as ‘Ofsted Inspectors’ (Office for Standards in Education), were looking very closely, in fact almost exclusively, at literacy and numeracy teaching in schools. A national expectation grew amongst school-based/related educators that this pertained also to the 4- and 5-year-olds in the anomalous, ‘in-between’ reception classes. TACTYC and its members believed that these children should have been experiencing a nursery-based, playful, curriculum rather than extended periods of teacher-led passivity. There was a further and inevitable backwash as the teachers of younger children were expected to be part of the preparation of children for the national Standard Assessment Tests at age 6 years. As the time being taken for the formal delivery of literacy and numeracy lessons became greater, the time for playful learning became less. By 2007, the TACTYC Executive began to feel that action needed to be taken and others were also expressing concerns about the negative impact of centralised policy on young children’s experiences (Anning and Edwards 1999; Moyles et al. 2001; Broadhead 2004). In particular, the TACTYC Executive were interested in exploring ways in which playful learning might become the heart of the child’s experience in early years educational settings, whilst also acknowledging that the adult has an important role to play through the provision of playful

pedagogies. What this role might be, how it might look in action and how it might be balanced against the centralising of the child's experience seemed worthy of further, systematic investigation.

Moving Forward in Challenging the Diminishing of Playful Learning in Early Years Educational Settings in England

It was felt that it would be timely to bring together a group of play scholars researching and disseminating aspects of play within educational settings. This would be held at Leeds Metropolitan University in the north of England. A small grant was obtained from the Vicky Hurst Trust, a foundation established to celebrate the life of Vicky Hurst, a huge advocate of and prolific author on early years play in the UK. A small additional grant was provided by the British Educational Research Association's Early Years Special Interest Group, led by Professor Elizabeth Wood and by Leeds Metropolitan University who also provided a site for the colloquium. A two-night/three-day residential was arranged for presenting scholars and invited international visitors in April 2008 (one of whom was Professor Louise Boyle Swiniarski).

The 2 days provided extensive opportunities for presentation and discussion of ongoing research and related findings. At the end of the 2 days, in seeking to ensure wider impact beyond those participating, two important decisions were taken by the group:

- To seek a publisher for the presentations so they might be more widely disseminated and so influence contemporary political and policy-related decisions and inform practice
- To take the issues around playful learning and playful pedagogies to the halls of the Houses of Parliament, the seat of power, in order to draw attention to the significant concerns about the diminishing of play as a recognised and integral part of every young child's playful learning experiences in an educational setting

Two key issues had arisen from our research-informed conversation at the 3-day play colloquium. These centred around the two constructs of '*playful learning*' and '*playful pedagogies*'. These were, at this time, unfamiliar terms in the English early years play vocabulary, and yet they chimed with the emerging messages from the presentations and discussions. It was decided to draw together the key messages around these two interconnected constructs for two reasons:

- As a first stage in building new and better understandings of the relationships between play and learning, as manifest through the role of a playful pedagogue. From this, we felt it would become easier to confront the message emerging from the early years curricular literature that 'play was a vehicle for learning and that practitioners should utilise it as such'. This was felt to be an unsophisticated and dated notion that needed to be challenged and we felt the research we had been presenting and engaging with might constitute an important step forward.
- As a basis for the presentation to Parliament, which was organised as described in the next section.

The Road to Parliament

The president of TACTYC, Wendy Scott had strong links with a Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament, the Right Honourable Annette Brooke. This event was held in 2009 when New Labour was still in power, and so prior to the establishing of the Coalition Government. Annette, a strong advocate for young children, agreed to host the event, a necessary prerequisite for entry to Parliament for such representations. A TACTYC working group set about planning the presentation and individually inviting a wide range of delegates including MPs, policymakers and representatives of other organisations with vested interests in the early years curriculum and we hoped, in playful learning and playful pedagogies. Refreshments were ordered. The event would consist of a power point presentation by Professor Pat Broadhead, then Chair of TACTYC and some written material provided in packs. The remainder of the event would be TACTYC Executive members along with Professor Elizabeth Wood from BERA circulating for one-to-one and small-group discussions with the delegates around the issues that had been raised in the power point presentation and contained within the material in the delegates' packs. The next section details the information in terms of brief but important points collated from the individual presentations at the colloquium which were subsequently organised to address the emerging and important constructs of:

- Playful learning
- Playful pedagogies

The following document was circulated to delegates at the meeting in the House of Commons. It is presented here in its entirety; it briefly summarises findings from the individual papers presented at the colloquium under the above two headings and identifies the play scholar whose work is being summarised in each instance. Based on discussions at the colloquium, it identifies, on conclusion, what further research would be useful in continuing to illuminate the interconnected constructs of playful learning and playful pedagogies and so to move forward the policy and practice debates.

Summary of the Findings from the Play Research Colloquium Held in April 2008

Nine researchers established in the field of play scholarship presented findings at Leeds Metropolitan University in April. Other national and international delegates were in attendance. The seminar explored contemporary research on children as playful learners and on adults as playful pedagogues. The research evidence is summarised under these two headings *together* with suggestions for developing a future research agenda. Few researchers are currently active in this field reflecting a general lack of funding.

Children as Playful Learners

Play and emotional and cognitive development are interconnected. Children engaged in play situations show greater evidence of problem-solving abilities and creativity. Children engaged in playful tasks they have initiated show higher levels of cognitive self-regulation (*Dr. David Whitebread, University of Cambridge*).

Children respond positively and quickly when adults convey the acceptance of playful learning in the classroom. Children for whom play is a regular and fulfilling occurrence in the classroom showed improved performance on problem-solving, number and literacy tasks (*Dr. Justine Howard, University of Swansea*).

Social free play is an evolved behaviour and is important for complex, autonomous social behaviour leading to self-knowledge and social competence in all primate species; rough and tumble play experience is essential for all juvenile primates, including human children, to independently learn the necessary skills to fully engage in the complex social relationships underlying adult society (*Dr. Pam Jarvis, Bradford College*).

Play can promote conflict resolution skills in young children; highly social and cooperative play in classrooms has clear links with learning, progression and identity formation (*Professor Pat Broadhead, Leeds Metropolitan University*).

Risky play is difficult to theorise but essential for well-being; children need opportunities to push themselves beyond boundaries in familiar environments; schools and classrooms have become risk-averse places, and this is detrimental to children's development and well-being (*Dr. Helen Tovey, Roehampton University, London*).

Children have many ways of making meaning (multimodality), and this is facilitated through imaginative play; there are clear links between playful meaning making and the meanings made as they use marks for early writing and for early written mathematics – key aspects of children's learning (*Maulfry Worthington: Free University Amsterdam*).

Children's role play is naturally influenced by the media; this is their culture and should be respected and understood; there are no polar opposites between their online and off-line worlds; motivation for reading/writing is high in virtual worlds, including in social networking sites (*Professor Jackie Marsh, University of Sheffield*).

Further research into playful learning is needed in order to:

- Extend our understanding of bio-cultural development and how this might influence curriculum and pedagogies
- Develop professionals' understanding of the links between cooperative play and intellectual development and of children's capacity to develop strategies for conflict resolution during social and cooperative play
- Understand pedagogies which respect children and which develop a climate of trust in early years settings
- Gather evidence of children's capacities to make meaningful choices and take the lead in their play
- Gain insights into how children's self-initiated activities lead to deeper, more sustained learning experiences

Adults as Playful Pedagogues

A pedagogy of play is only gradually being defined. Practitioners continue to have problems defining their role, assessing children's learning through play and understanding when and how to be involved. Play in early years settings is operating to an outcomes-led agenda which is contrary to the true nature of play (*Professor Elizabeth Wood, University of Exeter*).

Understanding the complexity of children's play as a work in progress is demanding for educators as they tend to engage in partial observations; educators need help in understanding the ways in which different areas of play provision can contribute to children's learning and how this is taken forward through planning and record-keeping (*Professor Pat Broadhead, Leeds Metropolitan University*).

Practitioners are reluctant to allow or enable children to take risks, they see danger rather than competence and subversion rather than confidence; children who lack access to challenging, adventurous play can become risk averse or reckless and do not develop the skills to be safe (*Dr. Helen Tovey, Roehampton University, London*).

Only knowledgeable adults can interpret the complex, inner meanings of children's play; this ability can be learned through informed observations of children and through professional dialogue (*Maulfry Worthington, Free University Amsterdam*).

Educators need a deeper understanding of children's computer use in the home; it is becoming very sophisticated at an early age for some children (*Professor Jackie Marsh, University of Sheffield*).

When teachers understand play, its provision and potential, then children respond with multilayered narratives and make powerful links between events in their home and school lives: teachers can respect and engage with the uncertainty of play in relation to its inherent learning potential (*Kathy Goouch, Canterbury Christchurch University*).

Further research is needed in order to:

- Develop a shared language and shared professional knowledge about the characteristics of play and playful learning in educational settings
- Strengthen understanding of how playful learning and the given curriculum can interconnect and extend professionals' confidence in making meaningful links
- Underpin professional development in observing and learning from play observations through joint activity and reflection (at pre- and in-service levels)
- Develop professional understanding of the links between cooperative play and intellectual development and of children's capacity to develop conflict resolution strategies during social and cooperative play
- Determine how play in educational settings generates creative thinking for adults and children
- Enable exemplary play pedagogues to share their excellent practice and understandings with others, including collaborative action research projects

Many of the above play scholars subsequently published their work in Broadhead et al. (2010), alongside other play scholars who came on board at the point of publication. In addition, a review of the primary curriculum that was ongoing at that

time also drew on extracts from the published summary of the work and spoke positively about the relationship between play and active learning for older children (DCSF 2008). It was a singular experience for all of us involved in the initiative and opened our eyes to the potential of engaging with playful entitlements for young children as a political act. But did it make a difference?

Subsequent Developments in Relation to Playful Learning in the Early Years of Education

In 2009 (still under the auspices of the New Labour Government), a publication emerged from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF 2009). It took new directions in extending and elaborating playful pedagogies, although the document did not have the status of ‘policy’ but of ‘guidance’. Significantly for an English government publication, for the first time it used the terms ‘pedagogy’, ‘playful learning’ and ‘playful teaching’ and was an extended exposition of and reflection on these terms and on the implications for creating an effective, appropriate and playful learning environment. Quite appropriately, the substantive publication sought to support practitioners in coming to grips with a challenging point of practice – namely how to ensure that within the day, a young child has opportunities both to initiate and direct their own playful learning and to be meaningfully engaged with adult-led, planned but playful activities. The government-funded REPAY project (Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002) had revealed from a study of 14 foundation stage settings that in terms of intellectual, social and dispositional outcomes, ‘the most effective settings are those that provide opportunities for teacher-initiated group work and the provision of freely chosen but potentially instructive play activities’ (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva 2004:713). Defining ‘instructive’ is the challenge in relation to playful learning in that the adult may not understand the learning potential of children’s playful activities unless they take time to study the play and to understand its potential. What may look to adults like ‘messiness’ may in fact contain the purpose and progression of playful learning (Broadhead 2004, 2006; Moyles 2010a). The richness and meaning making of children’s play are often unavailable to adults unless they can become skilled observers and interpreters of play (Broadhead and Burt 2011; Worthington 2010).

Wood (2010) has illustrated the complexity of the construct of achieving balance between adult-direction and child-initiated activity. In exploring this complexity, she draws a useful distinction between *mixed* and *integrated* pedagogical approaches. In *mixed* approaches, adult-directed activities take centre stage in planning, assessment and feedback, and child-initiated activities, including play, are left at the margins of practice. In contrast, with *integrated* approaches, adults are involved with children in planning for play and child-initiated activities, based on careful observations and well-structured and (for the child) meaningful interactions. In *integrated* approaches, planning and pedagogical decision-making are informed by children’s choices, interests, capabilities and knowledge, which are then fed forward by

practitioners into further curriculum planning. In an *integrated* model, teaching and learning become co-constructive processes, where the focus is on dynamic interactions between the people, resources and activities in the setting, with the curriculum being used as a framework rather than a straitjacket.

Wood's model is necessarily complex, and the related practices are not achieved only through exposure to policy or written guidance; reflective practice aids appropriation and understanding, and this takes time when new constructs are being unpacked, explored and examined (Moyles 2010b). Appropriation in this context implies not only policy application but contextualised interpretation and intelligent action. Let us return briefly to the DCSF (2009) pedagogical guidance publication. It provided the reader with a continuum of approaches (p. 5) as a starting point for examining this complexity. This continuum raises concerns about how playful learning is being conceptualised in this search for a 'balanced pedagogy', and I would argue that this conceptualisation is a legacy from the previous 20 years rather than an attempt to look ahead within paradigms that encompass the child as active meaning-maker who playfully draws on experiences from both within and beyond the classroom (Pramling-Samuelsson and Fleer 2009). There for four points or approaches described as follows:

1. Unstructured: play without adult support
2. Child-initiated play: adult support for an enabling environment and sensitive interaction
3. Focussed learning: adult-guided, playful, experiential activities
4. Highly structured: adult-directed; little or no play

The explanation goes on:

At one end, too little adult support can limit learning. While play without adults can be rich and purposeful, at times it can become chaotic or repetitive activity which is 'hands-on, brains-off'. At the other end of the scale, too much tightly directed activity deprives children of the opportunity to engage actively with learning.

This suggests that perceptions of 'child-initiated play' as 'messy' or 'chaotic' still prevail when it may be that the adults cannot make meaning from the play as initiated by the children because they do not fully understand the nature of those lives as they are represented in the play. English early years policy needs to engage with the substance of children's lives and with their cultural and social experiences as they underpin their identity formation (Brooker 2002; Papatheodorou and Moyles 2007). This is particularly important in those early years when children are making their first major transition from home to school and to the wider world. However, on a more positive note, this publication did mark a significant move from a predominantly developmental reference point of progression through 'stepping stones' and 'outcomes' to one of understanding how children make meaning in complex environments – and an early years setting is a hugely complex environment where adults routinely take for granted what every child must learn anew. So, there were aspects of the DCSF (2009) publication that broke new ground in discussing playful learning and playful pedagogies, but some parts of it also, that seemed to look back to previous and restricted play-related policy speak.

The Current Position in England

In 2010, Dame Clare Tickell was appointed by the Coalition Government to undertake a review of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). New proposals were published and a public consultation was undertaken. The responses were published in December 2011 as a summary document, and a further consultation was undertaken which is ongoing as this chapter is completed. This second phase of consultation is unusual in English policy development. Its purpose is not clear, but it may be that government were taken aback at the responses they received to the first consultation. There was much in this that respondents were critical of and which remain as key concerns even as I write.

There is insufficient space to go into depth at this point, but some key issues are as follows:

1. School-readiness has emerged as a key theme for the Coalition Government. It is presented as developmental readiness that relates especially to literacy and numeracy. New policy is advocating the assessment and categorisation of children as young as 2 years to identify them as showing the potential for having behavioural and learning difficulties in school. It seems that the school system will determine the developmental trajectory for young learners and young children will be pathologised through early labelling of failure.
2. Play has virtually disappeared from the document; the terms ‘playful learning’ and ‘playful pedagogy’ are not used. The terms ‘adult-led play’ and ‘guided play’ are the only references to play. The idea that children are powerful instigators of their own learning through play is ignored.
3. Literacy has been separated from Communication and Language. There is no acknowledgement of their interconnected nature nor of the wealth of cultural impact on learning associated with these areas. Literacy for young children appears to have been limited to learning to read and write.

As noted above, the consultation is ongoing and many people are responding to what they see as policy proposals that have turned back the clock in curricular provision for young children, and especially so in relation to what is now known and understood about the positive impact of playful learning and playful pedagogies. I can only say: ‘Watch this space!’

Becoming an Early Years Children’s Champion

Before I consider whether or not the journey to the Houses of Parliament was worth it, let me briefly describe a recent development in my life as, for me, this development is also part of the journey of advocacy, lobbying and the need to protect children’s rights and interests – the issues that were also at the heart of our play research and its dissemination of course.

I live in Sheffield, a large city in the north of England, just south of Leeds where I worked. Just prior to my retirement from academic life, I was approached by an officer of the Local Authority and by the local councillor with responsibility for children's services (known officially as the Cabinet Member) and asked if I would consider undertaking a voluntary role as 'Early Years Children's Champion'. As far as we are aware, Sheffield is the first Local Authority to create this role. I was privileged to be asked and accepted, although none of us at that time had any clear sense of how the role would unfold or what it would be.

The proposal for such a role had arisen from a public consultation that the Local Authority was undertaking relating to an ongoing Review of Children's Services across the city. It was subsequently agreed that the role would encompass the following:

- Build a dialogue with the Early Years Sector on how best to take collaborative action to improve children's early years experiences.
- Be an advocate for the importance of children's early years.
- Make suggestions and recommendations for practical action to the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families and the Executive Director for Children, Young People and Families.
- Encourage greater participation across the sector in pooling expertise, resources, knowledge and skills to ensure greater quality of services for young children and families in Sheffield.
- Support the delivery of the birth to five strategies and the intensified effort in Sheffield to improve the delivery and quality of early years services.
- Bring creative ideas and have up-to-date knowledge of research and methods.

These are substantial tasks and responsibilities for a volunteer, and the early part of the role has involved getting out and about and meeting people, attending a range of meetings and getting a picture of what is ongoing in a major city during a time of economic recession, cuts in public spending and services and austerity. I anticipate some interesting and potentially very challenging times ahead as I attempt to create a bridge between a cash-strapped local council and local services, many of which, support children and families suffering the impact of economic recession. I am certainly looking forward to being an advocate for play and to minimise the potentially negative impact of a school-readiness agenda that denies children their right to play and learn in ways that suit them and that denies practitioners the right to continue their own professional learning around play and playful pedagogies.

This chapter has argued that play currently remains peripheral within English policy documents where it would benefit from a much richer conceptualising as a learning experience. It currently continues to be framed within the context of adult activity, whereas play belongs to children. Creating pedagogies of play can embrace its socio-cultural dimensions for individual learners and for communities of co-learners and can recognise that the agency of the child requires new and expanded forms of pedagogical thinking; alongside this, we must also look to the longer-term 'protection' of playfulness (Parker-Rees 1999). Currently, such forward movement will have difficulty arising from pedagogies driven by policy because current framing is predominantly and

conservatively rooted in the past, relying most substantially on developmental and outcomes-based models. Young children have varied and rich experiences in the world and in the right conditions can clearly re-engage with these within their child-initiated and child-directed play experiences. There will always be activities designed and led by adults; perhaps it is time to stop calling them ‘play’ and to stop calling what children choose to do ‘unstructured’. Therein might lay new beginnings.

So was the journey worth it? Well of course it was and of course it goes on for me and for the other play scholars who contributed to that event. It led for one thing to being invited to write this chapter and so the work goes on. Who knows what those attending the seminar in the House of Commons remember of that day, but perhaps the fact that we did make our presentation there will be inspiration for others to do the same at some point in the future. We have to keep the child’s right to engage in playful learning and access playful pedagogies on the political agenda because if we don’t, who will?

References

- Anning, A., & Edwards, A. (1999). *Promoting children’s learning from birth to five: Developing the new early years professional*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Broadhead, P. (2004). *Early years play and learning: Developing social skills and cooperation*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Broadhead, P. (2006). Developing and understanding of young children’s learning through play; the place of observation, interaction and reflection. *British Educational Research Journal*, 32(2), 191–207.
- Broadhead, P., & Burt, A. (2011). *Understanding young children’s learning through play: Building playful pedagogies*. London: Routledge.
- Broadhead, P., Howard, J., & Wood, E. (Eds.). (2010). *Play and learning in the early years; from research to practice*. London: Sage.
- Brooker, L. (2002). *Starting school: Young children learning cultures*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families). (2008). *Interim independent review of the primary curriculum*. London: DCSF Publications.
- DCSF. (2009). *Learning, playing and interacting: Good practice in the early years foundation stage*. London: DCSF.
- DfEE (Department for Education and Employment). (1996). *Nursery education*. London: School Curriculum and Assessment Authority.
- DfES (Department for Education and Skills). (2003). *Foundation stage profile*. London: QCA.
- Dillon, J., Stratham, J., & Moss, P. (2001). The Role of the private market in day care provision for children in need. *Social Policy and Administration*, 35, 127–144.
- Early Childhood Research and Development Team. (2008). *New Brunswick curriculum framework for early learning and childcare*. New Brunswick, Canada: Department of Social Development.
- Miller, E., & Almon, J. (2009). *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why children need to play in school*. Childhood is College Park, MD., USA: Alliance for Childhood.
- Moyles, J. (2010a). Foreword. In P. Broadhead, J. Howard, & E. Wood (Eds.), *Play and learning in the early years: From research to practice*. London: Sage.
- Moyles, J. (2010b). *Thinking about play. Developing a reflective approach*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Moyles, J., et al. (2001). *Steps: statements on entitlement to play*. London: Open University Press.

- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). (2006). *Starting strong 11; Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <http://www.sourceoecd.org/education/9264035451>. December 2012.
- Parker-Rees. (1999). Protecting playfulness in Abbott et al. *Education Transformed*. London: Continuum.
- Papatheodorou, T., & Moyles, J. R. (2007). *Learning together in the early years*. London: Routledge.
- Pramling-Samuelson, I., & Fleer, M. (Eds.). (2006). *Play and learning in early childhood settings*. Berlin: Antiquariat im Hufelandhaus.
- Pramling-Samuelsson, I., & Fleer, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Play and learning in early childhood settings (International Perspectives)*. Dordrecht: Springer, The Netherlands.
- QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority). (2000). *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*. London: Department for Education and Employment.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Sylva, K. (2004). Researching pedagogy in English pre-schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(5), 713–730.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R., & Bell, D. (2002). *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years (REPEY report)* (DfES Research Report 356). London: Department for Education and Skills, DfES.
- Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2010). *Early childhood matters: Evidence for the effective pre-school and primary education project. (EPPE)*. London: Routledge.
- Vandenbroeck, M. (2003). From crèches to childcare: Constructions of motherhood and inclusion/exclusion in the history of Belgian childcare. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 4(2), 137–148.
- Wood, E. (2010). Developing integrated pedagogical approaches to play and learning. In P. Broadhead, E. Wood, & J. Howard (Eds.), *Play and learning in early years settings: From research to practice* (pp. 9–26). London: Sage.
- Worthington, M. (2010). Play is a complex landscape; imagination and symbolic meanings. In P. Broadhead, E. Wood, & J. Howard (Eds.), *Play and learning in early years settings: From research to practice* (pp. 127–144). London: Sage.