Chapter 63
Supporting the Application of Playful Learning and Playful Pedagogies in the Early Years Curriculum Through Observation, Interpretation, and Reflection

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Abstract This chapter examines developments in the English national curriculum for children from birth to 5 years and from the mid-1990s until 2012.

The chapter explores these different curricular iterations in relation to play, playful learning, and culturally informed playful pedagogies, including in relation to the final aspect, the perceived role of the adult in supporting playful learning and offering well-considered pedagogies. The place of adult observation of playful engagements has an especial focus. It links explicitly to long-term research undertaken by the author with practitioners. The research has underpinned the development of an observational tool known as the Social Play Continuum (SPC), described in the chapter. Its application has revealed high levels of intellectually challenging engagement in reciprocal play in early years settings. The capacities exhibited by young children far exceed those anticipated in assessment-related documentation. In particular, open-ended play spaces, which evolved in the research, have, seemingly, high potential for playful, cognitively challenging engagements.

The chapter concludes that, barring one exception no longer in use, the curricular iterations have paid little attention to playful learning and related cognitive challenge, learning, and achievement. As such therefore, assessment-related expectations in the English curriculum for young children appear to underestimate young children's capabilities.

Keywords Open-ended play • Observing and interpreting play • Playful pedagogies • Intellectually challenging play • Reciprocity

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63.1 Introduction

The early years curriculum and its related assessment procedures in England have moved through several iterations since the first government pronouncements were made in the mid-1980s. This was the period when the then Conservative Government began taking a wider and a particular interest in schools and in educational issues and when they also began determining the curriculum at all levels of state education. These levels included the early years, then defined as ages 3–5 years, although this would expand in the years to come to span birth to 5 years; primary education, for children aged 5–10 plus years; and secondary education for ages 11–16 or 18 years. The Education Reform Act (1988) was the first piece of government legislation to determine, firstly, the curriculum and, subsequently, in additional legislation, related forms of assessment for children aged 5−16 years. In due course both the curriculum and assessment requirements would cover the age group pre-5 years. The curriculum and assessment models in Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland are determined by their respective Parliaments and Assembly (Wales) and are not the subject of this chapter.

The first iteration of the early years curriculum in England came in 1996 and was entitled "Desirable Learning Outcomes." The emphasis on assessment was evident in the title (outcomes) but was not especially detailed. Subsequent curricula and assessment iterations followed and are outlined later in the chapter. These varied in content, length, and assessment-related demands until 2003 when the first formal assessment-related procedures were outlined in detail along with the related procedures for monitoring their completion, by early years educators.

Of particular interest to this chapter is the fact that in each of these iterations, the mention and status of playful engagement by children have varied as has also the place of educator observations of playful engagement and learning. The role of the adult has also been perceived differently across the iterations depending to a large extent on whether the government of the time felt that adults should "structure" the play or that children should lead their own learning through choice and self-direction; we shall see evidence of each across and within the iterations. Similarly, the place of observation, within the pedagogue's daily repertoire, has varied across these iterations, fluctuating, like play, in terms of comment, explanation, and expected focus in relation to both curriculum provision and assessment. The purpose of observation has also varied from being a tool to be employed to support the ticking of outcome-related boxes to an opportunity for educator insights in relation to children's interests and competence and in relation to the capacity of those observational insights to inform subsequent pedagogical decision-making. Both "play" and "observation," as shall be revealed, have been in and out of vogue with policy makers in England. As a consequence, educators have been subjected to a barrage of changes, both ideological and practical.

Throughout this period, I have undertaken joint research projects with early years practitioners/educators/pedagogues. The terms have become interchangeable within the English early years educational system although the term "pedagogue"

remains relatively underused. Qualified teachers do work in state-run early years settings, but there is also in England a large private sector that does not currently employ teachers. There is also a well-established voluntary and community sector which has been making provision for children and families since the mid-1960s. The ongoing research has related to the development and application of The Social Play Continuum (SPC). The SPC is essentially an observational tool to use to inform an understanding by researchers and pedagogues of children's thematic interests, ideas, explorations, and competences, as they play with peers in self-selected activities. The research has revealed how this information can be used by pedagogues as a basis for informed decision-making relating to pedagogical developments to support curriculum development and assessment activity. Therefore, for the purposes of this chapter, the term "curriculum" focuses substantially on the potential for, and of, children's playful activities in their early years settings, and it is this focus that is explored. Within the context of "assessment," the chapter looks particularly to the pedagogical use of close observation of children's playful engagements with peers in order to better understand the potential of play for young children's learning across the spectrum and the implications of this new knowledge for pedagogical decision-making.

In this chapter, I describe the development of the SPC, its rationale, and applications and pay particular attention to the aspects of play and of observing children at play. I explain its potential in relation to understanding some of the complexities of play in educational settings along with the pedagogical decision-making of the early years educator. The chapter then gives further detail on the iterations of the early years curriculum and assessment to examine the levels of attention given therein to play and to observationally based pedagogies. The chapter then returns to the more recent of the joint research into play to outline the development of open-ended play spaces in early years classrooms and the implications of these for developing culturally informed pedagogies and for curriculum planning and pupil assessment. Finally I consider the place of observation, interpretation, and professional reflection as curriculum and assessment-related activities, considering not only their potential for revealing individual competence in the playing child but also the need for assessment in the early years to relate also to the deepening of pedagogical knowledge relating more widely to how children learn and develop through playful encounters with their peers in appropriately resourced early years settings. My intention is to challenge the application of the majority of curriculum and assessment-related iterations that have been evident in England since the mid-1990s and to identify the strengths and potential of the only iteration to truly value the power and potential of educator observations of child-initiated, playful engagements and learning.

In particular, this chapter aims to argue the extensive potential of young children to learn through play, in educational settings, in the right conditions, and to examine how these conditions are framed for better or worse by policy and pedagogy. It may be useful at this point to add some further, brief contextual background to the English early years system as it draws attention to issues that are of concern internationally relating to introducing young children to formal educational settings at too early a point in their development. In England, since 1944, children have been

required to enter school at the start of the term after the term in which they would become 5 years old. It is even younger now in England, with young 4-year-olds often being found in the more formal setting of the school classroom as opposed to the more informal nursery or preschool settings. More recently, government policy makers have spoken of "bright 3-year-olds entering formal schooling in the reception classes." The reception class is a particularly English phenomenon established to allow younger children to enter school where no nursery classes were available. Now the majority of schools have a reception class where the curriculum should be that of the early years but where the formality of teacher-directed tasks has prevailed to greater or lesser extents, largely dependent on the school and reception teachers' beliefs about the value of play in the early years (Bennett and Kell 1989; Cleave and Brown 1991; Whitebread and Bingham 2011).

63.2 The Development of the Social Play Continuum (SPC)

The work drew initially on the publications of Parten (1933) and Charlesworth and Hartup (1967), both of whom had, from their own studies, presented a set of behavioral characteristics associated with the growth of sociability in playing and interacting peers. Sociability is evident in young children from the ages of about 2–3 years onward (Schaffer 1996), hence my focus on the early years age range in classroom-based settings. Each of their "lists" contained both communicative and cognitive behaviors, designed to shape observational studies; the communicative behaviors included both verbal and nonverbal engagements. Their work, particularly that of Charlesworth and Hartup, coincided with my own research questions at that time which were concerned to identify the potential that traditionally provided play materials in English early years settings had for promoting sociability and cooperation in 3- and 4-year-old children (Broadhead 1997). The materials were sand, water, large construction, small construction and small world, and role play. Event sampling was used on target children when they engaged with peers, in self-selected and self-directed play in a preschool, nursery setting. Adults were asked not to intervene in the observed play as it was the behaviors and responses of the children that were in focus. An underpinning rationale throughout the research has been that it is the engagement with both peers and artifacts that reveals, to the observer, children's competences, thinking, and interests, more so, than solitary play. This early study revealed insights into the sociable and cooperative potential of these traditionally available play activities and resources. It also revealed the levels and types of reciprocal behaviors with which these young children were engaging, as they played with peers during 116 recorded play bouts. Transcripts revealed that the reciprocal engagements within the play bouts were characterized by differing levels of reciprocity and that the intensity of some engagements was far deeper and extended over longer periods than did others. This study argued that when play was cooperative (as opposed to being "social"), the play bouts contained combined action, activity-related interactive dialogue, problem setting and problem

solving, and high levels of concentration among interacting peers. It was argued that the potential for learning was evidenced in the exhibition of these behaviors. Drawing from these findings, the first "version" of the Social Play Continuum was presented with communicative and cognitive characteristics aligned with each of four stages of progression in levels of sociability as follows: Stage 1, parallel play; Stage 2, social play; Stage 3, highly social play; and Stage 4, cooperative play. (A further developed version of the SPC is presented a little later in the chapter.) The work was at this point aligning with Vygotskian theory (1978; 1986). In particular, this related to the four stages of the SPC as being resonant with the zone of proximal development (ZPD). These are the contiguous zones of potential learning to which, Vygotsky argued, children might move with support from expert others (Vygotsky 1978). I was interested in the extent to which those expert others might be peers in keeping with Reynolds and Jones' (1997) work when they explore the concept of children as master players. Aligned with the interpretation and application of Vygotskian theory was Saxe et al.'s (1993) work which added weight to "a sizable body of theoretical analysis and empirical evidence regarding the ways that children's peer interactions may influence their developing understanding" (p. 107). In keeping with Vygotskian theory, Daniels (1993) was also at this time arguing that adults could create the possibilities for development rather than the possibilities being defined within the biology of the child. Pedagogy was key, but this needed to be a pedagogy informed by knowledge of the child's cultural heritage and through the transmission of culture and experience via social interaction and communications with peers and with adults. The discussions relating to the ZPD have progressed exponentially over the years. Chaiklin (2003) examines these developments, emphasizing collaboratively orientated rather than independent development while also acknowledging the importance of a personal sense of meaning for the learner within the activity in aiding a zonal transition in personal development. This chapter asserts that both play within the early years curriculum and observation, as a key assessment tool, can contribute to the development of such a culturally informed and personally meaningful pedagogy. The research into sociability and cooperation then continued with older 4-year-old and 5-year-old children in a reception class setting (Broadhead 2001).

The four original "stages" of the SPC were redesignated as "domains" to avoid confusion in relation to the language of the emerging government curriculum. Parallel play was renamed "associative play" to more accurately reflect that some peer engagements were occurring. Also the language and actions were more clearly delineated to facilitate the observational tracking of reciprocity and its maintenance that were being evidenced in the children's engagements as data were collected and analyzed. Across the datasets, these older 4- and 5-year-olds were revealing themselves, within their self-selected playful engagements, to be functioning at high levels of intellectual, linguistic, and cooperative engagement as described in Broadhead (2001, p. 34):

Table 63.1 The characteristics of cooperative play and their exemplification

Higher-order characteristics of play in the cooperative domain	Exemplification from classroom observations of play
Initiating and sustaining verbal interactions	These were extended conversations between two or more peers relating to the play activity with which they were focused. The conversations may be intermittent, but continuous observation revealed that they were interconnected and would last throughout the play period
Initiating and responding to nonverbal interactions	Interacting peers would recognize and respond positively to facial expressions and body language. This might include smiles, laughter, nodding and shaking the head, frowns, and hand or arm gestures. Sometimes whole body movements might communicate ideas through nonverbal demonstration
Interpreting peers' actions	One example would be for one child to begin to move play materials to a new site and for others to recognize this as significant within the play. A child might begin to dismantle a design that a group had worked on and other children would accept this as a positive development and not as an act of destruction
Problem framing with different materials	One child might say: "This isn't working, we need something else," and others would respond by looking around or going in search of something better for the problem. Children might return with a range of materials, and they would then be tried out and commented upon in discussions
Problem solving with different materials	Here, the children would reach an agreement on which materials or resources best suited the solution needed. This could be a rapid decision or might take several minutes
Successfully entering ongoing play	This was accomplished by children who had learned that some strategies worked and some did not. Bursting into the play seldom worked. Watching from the sides, offering comments and positive nonverbal expressions, and offering useful materials or verbal suggestions usually achieved successful entry. The key seemed to be to take one's time, to show oneself as nonthreatening, and to be useful to the participating players, and these strategies had to be learned
Selecting and implementing an appropriate role of degree of involvement in ongoing activities	This often led on from successful entering of the play and might depend on the levels of familiarity between interacting peers. Children with well-established friendships and histories of playing together and sharing narratives achieved this with relative ease, almost hiding the levels of sophistication being exhibited as roles were allocated, selected, and invented. For newcomers, it was often easier to enter large group activities rather than where three or four tightly knit and very familiar peers were playing. The challenge was to blend, and again these were skills that had to be learned at opportune times of playful engagement

(continued)

Table 63.1 (continued)

Higher-order characteristics of play in the cooperative domain	Exemplification from classroom observations of play
Developing a shared sense of direction and goal orientation	In order for an observer to recognize and note this characteristic, it was usually necessary to observe extended play periods. Intentions might be evident at the outset with phrases like: "Let's make a. . .," but this could be misleading as goals might change through discussion and the introduction of new materials. Observations would reveal a strong sense of unity and collaboration when this characteristic was evident and also strong indications of deep thinking and reflection by individual children and collectively as they articulated and moved toward goal achievement
Empathizing	This seemed to be a function of well-established or developing friendships and familiarity. It might be manifest through a smile or a nod at a new idea or suggestion, offering an affirmation. It could be tenderness or consolation at some physical hurt or unpleasant remark from another child. It might come as reassurance if an adult stopped the activity and a child looked perturbed: "We can do it tomorrow can't we?" It was a mature acknowledgment by an empathizing child that an appropriate interjection was needed at that point in time. Often, when one child empathized, others would also join in as if being reminded that such a response was possible and helpful to sustain the play

See Broadhead 2001, p. 34 for the characteristics identified in the left-hand column. The descriptions in the right-hand column have been added for clarity in the chapter

Interestingly, none of these complex, reciprocal behaviors were evident as characteristic of this age group within the available curriculum documentation (DfEE 2000). Indeed they would not feature in any of the curriculum or assessment iterations, as the next section will show.

The SPC has been further refined through subsequent research (Broadhead 2004, 2006, 2009). The most notable addition was to complement the language and action sheet, used for observational purposes, with a second sheet. This sheet supported observer categorization of observed play bouts by specifying the characteristics of play at each of the four domains (associative, social, highly social, and cooperative play). The current version of the SPC is provided at this point for clarification. The behaviors and characteristics detailed above in Table 63.1 are now embedded within the descriptors detailed on the two "sides" of the SPC as it was developed to become an observational tool for identifying progression in play and for reflective consideration of how the surrounding pedagogy enhanced or restricted the potential for children to make progression through playful engagements (Fig. 63.1).

THE SOCIAL PLAY CONTINUUM – A TOOL FOR THE OBSERVATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF PLAYFUL LEARNING AND FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLAYFUL PEDAGOGIES - SIDE 1

Observation start time:	Children entering play:
Area of provision:	Children leaving play:
Observation finish time:	

L = Language ***A = Action observed*** ***L/A = Language and Action Combined***
RL = Reciprocal language ***RA = Reciprocal Action*** ***Rl/RA = Reciprocal language and reciprocal action combined***

ASSOCIATIVE DOMAIN	SOCIAL DOMAIN	HIGHLY SOCIAL DOMAIN	COOPERATIVE DOMAIN
A: looks towards peers	**A:** Smiling	**RA:** Offering/accepting of objects evident	**RA:** Offering/accepting objects sustains/extends play theme
A: Watches play	**A:** Laughter	**RL**: Comment on own action/described intent with acknowledgement leading to extended exchange	**RL:** Explanations/descriptions utilised
A: Imitates play	**RA:** Eye contact made	**RL:** Dialogue a mix of activity related and non-related but a theme is evident	**RL:** Sustained dialogue is activity related and clear theme(s) emerge
A: Object offered, not accepted	**L:** Play noises, play voice	**RL:** Sporadic dialogue develops role play	**RL/RA:** New idea/material extends play and is sustained
A/L: Object taken, altercation	**A:** Object taken, no altercation	**RA/L:** Eye contact/laughter, (play noise) combined as behavioural cluster	**RL/RA:** Children display a shared understanding of goals
A: Parallel play period	**RA:** Object offered and received	**RA/RL:** Brief reciprocal sequences. e.g. giving/following instructions seeking/giving approval offering/accepting objects asking/answering questions	**RL:** Offering and accepting verbal help
L: Self-talk	**L/A:** Consent sought and object accessed	**RL/RA:** New ideas or materials have some impact	**RA:** Offering and accepting physical help
A/L: Comment on action directed at peer; peer does not respond	**L:** Approval sought, not given		**RL/RA:** Verbal and physical help combined
	RL: Approval sought and given		**RL/RA:** Problem identified and solved
	L: Instruction given, no response		**RL/RA:** Dramatic scenarios enacted linked to play theme(s)
	L/RA: Instruction given, positive response		
	L: Question asked, no response		
	RL: Question asked, response		
	L/RA: Comment on own action/described intent directed at peer, peer looks		
	RL: Comment on own action/described intent directed at peer , verbal response		

Emergent play themes noted:

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THE SOCIAL PLAY CONTINUUM – REFLECTING ON AND LOCATING THE OBSERVED PLAY –SIDE 2

Increasing levels of reciprocity and momentum →

Characteristics of associative play	Characteristics of social play	Characteristics of highly social play	Characteristics of cooperative play
Self talk does not elicit a response	May involve much movement indoors or outdoors	May involve movement or one location	Players remain predominantly in one location
No/very little dialogue	Children leave and join the play at frequent intervals	Group relatively stable with some entering or leaving	Shared understanding of goal orientation
No/very little eye contact	Associative players often nearby	Suggestions emerge which begin to extend ongoing play	Players remain until goals achieved; new goals identified
Seemingly little regard for proximity of peers	Little development of play ideas, often repetitive	New objects/materials brought to play but may not become integral to play	A highly imaginative use of ideas and materials as play themes are taken on board and explored
Limited periods of peer interaction	Little shared understanding of goal achievement	Sporadic evidence of shared understandings of goal orientation	Players seek additional resources to extend their play themes
Overtures ignored	Dialogue does not always relate to activity	Role play may be evident with some combined dramatic intent	Role play has clear dramatic aspects
	Play punctuated by periods of associative play	Interruptions/altercations may be evident when play returns to social	A relative absence of play noises
	Altercations evident when play returns to social	Adult intervention seldom sought	Absorption in task with extended levels of concentration
	Adult intervention may often be sought		Altercations are resolved in play as problem-solving activity
			Play achieves a finished product (where design is involved)
			Adult intervention not sought until completion

Comments and records (e.g. information about individual children, ideas for developing area of provision in focus and associated resources, location, extensions, adult intervention, class/group discussions).

Identify play domain (including 'moving towards'): Associative Social Highly Social Cooperative

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Fig. 63.1 The social play continuum

The ongoing research has shown that 4- and 5-year-olds have the potential to exhibit all of the behaviors and characteristics contained within the SPC, but that their potential to do this is substantially influenced by a wide range of pedagogical aspects and issues, many of which are significantly influenced by prevailing government policy. Because the research was undertaken jointly with educators, their interpretations and reflections gave considerable insights into these pedagogical features. Before examining some pedagogical features of the research further, it would be helpful to look more closely at the policy iterations that have framed the developing early years educational climate within which the research was taking place. It will become evident that playful learning and playful pedagogies were minimally featured in early years curriculum and assessment policy during this period. The messages that early years educators were receiving did not convey status for play and neither did they reveal any of the complex, high-order behaviors and engagements by interacting peers that the ongoing research was making evident. Iteration 3, as we shall see, did hold some potential for play.

63.3 Curriculum and Assessment Iterations in the Early Years in England

This section considers the four iterations of English early years curricular documents from 1996 until 2012 in relation to their engagement (or otherwise) with two particular aspects of early education that have long been recognized as central to good practice across the globe:

Perspectives on play in early years, as manifest in English curricular documents
The place of educator observation of children's play as depicted in those documents as a key part of the educator's repertoire

63.4 Iteration 1: Desirable Learning Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education (DfEE 1996)

This document was aimed at those working with children of pre-compulsory school age across the maintained (state) private, voluntary, and community sectors. It detailed the outcomes to be evident in young children's repertoires when they entered compulsory schooling, which might be recalled from discussion above could be children aged 4 or 5 years and could be very young 4-year-olds. This slim document makes only one very brief reference to "frequent observations" in relation to "progress and future learning needs." The document makes no references to play. A review was undertaken in 1999, and arising from extensive criticisms, a second iteration was developed.

63.5 Iteration 2: Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (DfEE 2000)

This was a more extensive and detailed curriculum document. It was aimed at those early years settings that received newly allocated government grant funding for 3- and 4-year-old children and for schools that had nursery aged children (3–4 years) and for 4- and 5-year-old children in the reception class. This document contains both guidance for practice and principles to underpin practice. It also contains very detailed developmental “stepping stones” and “outcome goals” for the children’s attainment at the end of the foundation stage (5 years of age). These stepping stones and goals were elaborated within six areas of learning: personal social and emotional development; communication, language, and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development; and creative development. The underpinning principles mentioned the importance of allowing children to determine learning activities for themselves. Some mention is made of observation: “practitioners must be able to observe and respond appropriately to children” (p. 11) with brief further expansion of two paragraphs on p.16 of the document. Play is briefly mentioned (p. 25) as “a key way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge.” A distinction is drawn between “planned play” and “spontaneous play” with the former depicted in a way that gives it a seemingly higher status. Any further mentions of play or observation are incidental, and no further elaborations of either aspect are given as guidance to educators.

In 2003, the early years curriculum was augmented by the publication of the Foundation Stage Profile (DfES 2003). This provided detailed assessment scales for each of the six areas of learning. Local authorities were subsequently required to assign teams of early years advisors to monitor the assessments across settings, thus creating a culture of performativity and surveillance (David et al. 2010; Broadhead and Burt 2012). It was expected that teachers would build up the profile over a year although no mention is made of the place of observation of children’s play within this process. Neither are children’s self-initiated playful activities mentioned as potential sites for assessment. The assessment requirements were extensive and time-consuming with handmade notes eventually being replaced by computer-based tick boxes. It became apparent that many educators were formally assessing children in planned, staged assessment activities which took children away from playful engagements in order to ensure rapid completion by the assessing adult. Play was noted as diminishing in reception classrooms (David et al. 2010).

63.6 Iteration 3: The Early Years Foundation Stage (DfES 2007)

This emerged to replace the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (2000) but the Foundation Stage Profile remained in place. Of the four iterations (one more was to follow), this publication gave the greatest emphasis both to play and to the place of observation and reflection as integral parts of the educator's role, on a day-to-day basis. It also covered the period birth to 5 years, a move that was much welcomed by the sector in respecting issues in relation both to the learning potential of very young children and issues of transition from home to school and from setting to setting and from preschool to school. It was supplemented by extensive national and local training programs and by a wide range of software that drew attention to the importance of high-quality play experiences and to the importance of making time to watch and learn from children's engagements with play activities and with teacher-directed activities. Just prior to the demise of the Labour Government, a supplementary document was published (DCSF 2009). This was perhaps the most comprehensive policy document ever issued by an English government to celebrate, explain, and illustrate the centrality of both play and observation within early years practice. Extensive examples of each are given. For the first time, the terms "playful learning" and "playful teaching" were used and explained. A cycle of "observe-assess-respond" was illustrated. The publication provided a richly illustrated alternative to the previous culture of "performativity and surveillance." However, its impact was short-lived. Although the document remained accessible on an independent website; the coalition government was quick to remove it from the government website and also replaced Iteration 3 with Iteration 4.

63.7 Iteration 4: Early Years Foundation Stage (DoE 2012)

This document and the prior consultation process introduced and heavily promoted the construct of "school readiness" for young children, a construct which has subsequently caused much debate and resistance within early years communities in England, both academic and practitioner based (Whitebread and Bingham 2011; see also Whitebread and Bingham, this Volume section on innovative and long lasting programmes). Iteration 4 was described on the government website as "a simpler framework." It reduced the number of early learning goals from 69 to 17. A progress check for 2-year-olds was introduced. The terms "playing and learning," "active learning," and "creating and thinking critically" are included as "learning characteristics," but no indication is given as to how the meanings of these terms are to be interpreted and applied. The curriculum is now divided into three prime areas (communication and language, physical development, and personal, social, and emotional development) and four specific areas: literacy, mathematics, understanding the world, and expressive arts and design, suggesting for many that differing levels

of status are implied from the separation into two groupings. The document speaks of "planned purposeful play" (paragraph 1.9). This goes on to state that as children become "older" (meaning toward 5 years of age), the balance of activities should be more adult led than child led, reiterating it seems the construct of school readiness being a prime purpose for early years education. In relation to the revised assessment profile, published in 2013, a range of web-based documents and web-based resources have been produced, but there is little information relating to observation and reflection as integral parts of pedagogical development or child-initiated activity within the assessment process. Four brief paragraphs can be located in the statutory guidance. There is brief mention of "child-initiated activity" but no mention of play within these paragraphs. A wide number of "learning journeys" are exemplified in the related web-based materials. These are predicated on assumptions that observations will be taking place and examples of observations are given, some of these drawn from playful activities. However, the thrust of these examples seems solely concerned with evidencing the identified and required 17 outcomes that the educator must assess. The assessment point is currently being debated as either when the child enters the reception classroom or, as is currently the case, toward the end of the reception year. There is no mention of integral links with pedagogical developments or of the complexity of playful learning. Such constructs are ignored within the examples. Play is presented as a site for assessment.

In summary, since 1996 when curricula and assessment-related documents relating to the early years of education were first published, it can be seen that the levels of emphasis within these policy statements on both "play" and "educator observation of play" have been relatively consistent. Apart from the document published in 2007, which held sway until 2011 (it was withdrawn prior to the publication of Iteration 4 in 2012), the other three iterations have made minimal references to both play and observation. None of these references were sufficient to convey an understanding of the need to grasp the complexities of play or to convey the potential that observing play could have in the development of playful pedagogies – itself a huge and unexplored complexity with educational provision in the early years. Only Iteration 3 – developed under the Labour Government and funded and implemented at national and local levels with teams of specialist early years advisors – entered into the complex worlds of understanding playful learning and recognizing that playful pedagogies grew from reflections upon well-constructed observations of children engaged in self-initiated play. This document also acknowledged that observing children and formulating understandings about what those observations have the potential to reveal is a complex and demanding task for educators that goes beyond "watching" and into the conceptualization of children's playful engagement in collaborative activity as learning and development.

Research relating to the development of the SPC has endeavored to reveal some of these complexities through data collection with educators (the people who know the children well) and through the analysis of naturalistic and spontaneous play activities in classroom settings.

63.8 A Further Development in the Research: The Emergence of "Open Ended Role Play" or "The Whatever You Want It to Be Place"

It was stated earlier that there would be consideration of the pedagogies of playful learning, as revealed through educator reflection during the ongoing research. This methodological opportunity led to a point of significant insight for the research as embodied in the above sub-title. This section needs to offer the reader a little more background into the use of the SPC to contextualize these revelations and the discussion around the importance of the development of playful pedagogies and the links therein with curriculum and assessment.

The research undertaken with five reception teachers (Broadhead 2004) had, as had other projects, utilized separate but simultaneous observations of play bouts with both the teacher and the researcher making use of the SPC. Post-observation reflection had followed on from the joint observations, and at this point the completion of Side 2 of the SPC was compared across each observer. Here, the observer is required to make a judgment as to in which of the four domains the play had been most substantially located. This allowed us to calculate the number of observations located in each of the four domains across all classrooms in relation to each of the observed areas of play (sand, water, etc.). This led to a shared interest across participating teachers and the researcher as to which of the observed play activities was stimulating the greatest amount of play in the cooperative domain. This was found to be sand play followed by large construction play (large bricks) and play with small construction materials with small world materials. Role play stimulated the lowest levels of play in the cooperative domain. In a project discussion with all teachers and the researcher, one teacher noted that it was the more open-ended play materials that stimulated the higher levels of cooperative play. Discussion led us to explore how, across the classrooms, the role play areas had been themed with two of them being home corners, one a café, one a shop, and one a birthday party. As a consequence we debated, children were implicitly expected to model these themes when in these areas rather than being able to initiate and sustain whatever themes they wished, as was the case when playing with other materials. We decided, as an outcome of these pedagogical discussions, to establish what we called "open-ended play areas" in each of the five classes. The teachers provided cardboard boxes, large pieces of fabric, and other materials, and we undertook further joint observations of this new area of play. All subsequent observations were located in the cooperative domain. This led to further project discussions about the potential of such open-ended materials in allowing children to initiate and sustain their play themes and commit to their extended and reciprocal engagements in ways characterized both in Table 63.1 and on Side 1 of the SPC. One of the teachers reported that she was discussing "the open-ended role play area" with her class 1 day and invited them to think of a new name for it. A girl remarked that it was "the whatever you want it to be place" because as she explained: "it can be whatever you want." Young as she was, she had fully grasped the potential of this play space to match with her own

inner plans, memories, interests, experiences, and ideas. But more than this, we noted how this space allowed children to recognize compatible interests and to align these interests in cooperative endeavor and extensive problem setting and solving. They were engaged in what Bodrova (2008) describes when saying that play allows children to engage in new forms of thinking, bringing alive internal ideas by the creation of external realities that they then collaboratively inhabit.

In a later research project, Broadhead collaborated for a longitudinal study with another reception class teacher to study how the creation of a large-scale "whatever you want it to be place" in the outdoor area had impact on children's play (Broadhead and Burt 2012). Burt (p. 140) eloquently describes the extensive pedagogical challenges of working in this way:

"They (other teachers) think that by working like this, we are doing less. But we are not. I think we are doing far more. We are spending less time doing some of the more structured things. . . although we still do them, but more time observing the play, interacting with the play and using play as the basis of our planning and then going forward with it . . ."

In the book, we describe some of the requirements of this complexity as follows:

These pedagogies include:

> Extended periods of time available for playful engagements alone and with peers on a daily basis;
>
> Team planning that builds on the observed interests and preoccupations of children;
>
> Recognition of and respect for the children's emerging and repeated play themes;
>
> Support for mobility in play scenarios as they move indoors and outdoors, sometimes requiring high levels of physical activity;
>
> Sensitive adult interventions that start from the child's agenda and not the adult's agenda;
>
> A willingness to allow children to transport materials from play site to play site because play themes are often developed through mobility;
>
> Providing spaces that are large enough for more complex designs that older children can create with like-minded peers. (pp. 152–3)

In this classroom, regular observations of the children's play experiences and interaction across the early years team have supported the pedagogical development of the play area. The staff articulated how the quality of the play was now higher in the setting with children engaged in intellectually challenging and self-initiated tasks on a regular basis and, interestingly, how the levels of antisocial or unacceptable behaviors had diminished. Children were more inclined to comply with adult directives for adult-led activities, relating to literacy and numeracy when they were undertaken. As one team member, Debbie, puts it in her reflections:

> Children's behavior is fantastic now; we don't have many problems, the odd bickering now. But before, when we were asking them to do what we wanted them to do all the time, we had more behavior issues, whereas now we don't.

The final section considers some implications for the chapter having juxtaposed the findings from the ongoing research against the curriculum and assessment iterations which paralleled the research. The research findings have aimed to reveal the

competence and complexities young children can exhibit in playful engagements where playful pedagogies prevail. The key question is whether curriculum and assessment policy iterations in England serve children and educators as well as they might.

This brief section has aimed to show how pedagogical thinking and decision-making relating to play has a positive impact on the learning potential of cooperative play. Teacher thinking and decision-making can allow play to become an integral part of the daily curriculum. It can also provide opportunities to learn from observations of children's learning and development and also about the kinds of play experiences that might challenge and liberate children.

From policy to practice; protecting the status of self-initiated play and educator observation within early years curriculum and assessment.

The four English early years policy iterations reviewed in this chapter have revealed that, with one exception, this policy has paid little attention to playful learning and its associated complexities. It has paid similarly scant attention to the observation of play both as a route to informing pedagogy and educator professional development and as a means of assessment. Only one set of legislation and guidelines, Iteration 3, was designed and developed to actively support educators in observing children's learning through play and in using these observations as integral to both curriculum planning and assessment activity. This iteration is now obsolete, having been replaced by policy which prioritizes an early start to teacher-directed activity and a focus on school readiness.

Yet, drawing on joint research with educators and the development of the SPC, we have seen something of the potential of young children in terms of their capacity to consistently display and utilize the complex and high-order characteristics of the Social Play Continuum when classroom pedagogies allow them to do so. Drawing from this research, the chapter has argued that these pedagogies can further benefit from the incorporation of open-ended play materials in order to more effectively liberate children's memories, ideas, and experiences by allowing them to initiate and sustain thematic play scenarios in cooperation with peers. A deep immersion in play brings with it the capacities for sustaining cooperative interactions and with this comes a range of behaviors indicative of both learning and development (as the cooperative domain reveals). Unfortunately, the current early years policy iteration in England gives no indication of taking regard of these capacities and competencies. It actively promotes adult-led play and structured play as good curricular practice. This chapter has aimed to illustrate that playful pedagogies do have a very active and engaged role for educators; adults are by no means bystanders in this form of curricular engagement. Their own intellectual engagements are demanding, and it is through observation, interpretation, and reflection that they create the conditions for children to lead their own learning through play.

The chapter has spoken of "culturally informed pedagogies" where educators recognize, via observation and assessment, that the thematic interests in which children most substantially engage and cooperate can arise from a wide range of experiences. For example, in one extended joint observation in the "whatever you want it to be place," we saw a group of six children engaging with the play themes of

domestic life, burglars, babysitting, and the literacy hour. While the first three are drawn from home experiences, the literacy hour was at that time a daily, class-based experience. In Broadhead and Burt (2012), where this vignette is presented, we argue that children seldom pretend. Their play is rooted in memory, experience, and a desire to understand their place in the world; its demands upon them; and their own potential for impact. Observing and interpreting children's play lead to a deeper understanding of both individual and collective cultures and to more informed decisions about how to pedagogically structure the children's daily experiences of play in ways that liberate both child and adults. Observing children's open-ended and free choice play brings their own cultural heritages and personal interests to the fore, and yet we see nothing of this in current policy iterations in England.

If play is complex to understand, then playful learning is even more complex. The SPC depicts some of these complexities in terms of play characteristics, behaviors, and uses of language. The observer is required to note their display and also, alongside this, to capture the narratives of play. It is from understanding and reflecting on those narratives that the culturally informed pedagogies can emerge. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the completion of the sheets can tell the educator which materials are stimulating cooperative play in the classroom – with its high-order demands on the interacting peers. But play is not just the exhibition of characteristics, behaviors, and language. These are the manifestations of play. Play tells us about children's lives, knowledge, and ideas. It is important to know of these if we are to better understanding playful learning in young children and to best support it with playful pedagogies, which of course includes assessment-related tasks for the educator. If we were to ask ourselves how well policy makers in England understand these complexities, then on the evidence we have seen in this chapter, the answer would be "not very well." Indeed it might even be "not at all." In such climates this chapter concludes, neither observation of children nor their play will be deemed important and our curriculum and associated pedagogies will be the poorer for it.

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