

Pat Broadhead

Pat Broadhead is Professor of Playful Learning at Leeds Metropolitan University and Chair of Tactyc (Training, Advancement and Co-operation in Teaching Young Children), an early years organisation for anyone involved with educating and training people who work with young children.

Welcome to ETC, Pat. Since we last discussed play on these pages, the landscape's changed mightily. We've seen the introduction of the Foundation stage in Wales and the Early Year Foundation Stage in England, the introduction of the Play Strategy for England, and significant investment in play spaces in communities across the UK. Progress, surely?

Pat: Well the government [in England] thinks it's all solved, because it's got the word 'play', however many times, into the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). But, all that's done is put us back to where we were before the National Curriculum. It is welcome to have play accepted back into the early years curriculum but there's still much progress to be made on this and, importantly... there's no funding for researching the relationship between play and learning. Yet, there's value in exploring this. For example, when I've done research [with teachers], as they've introduced more open-ended playful learning opportunities... behaviour problems have started to disappear.

Nevertheless, in a classroom environment, it's difficult to balance teaching and playful learning...

Pat: Yes, if you want deeply-immersed, open-ended play indoors, then you need to think about the spaces in which it's going to happen, because if play spills over from a designated space then it does become invasive for other children.

I talk to teachers about having potentially noisier play areas outside the classroom, if they can – in corridors – and trying to use spaces they've not utilised previously. I worked with a school that set up an area in a corridor, and it was fascinating how often other adults and other children passing by used to stand and just watch the play. And of course, you can involve children in the design and use of the space as well – that's part of the pedagogy; as well as managing play, you actually invite children to solve the problems and organise the spaces.

One issue of particular concern at the moment: if you're creating a more playful environment in primary schools, it's going to be even harsher for children to step into a secondary school, an environment which is regulated, more demanding, and where the teaching style is completely different.

Pat: Right. We're not creating a culture in which we're actively trying to explore and seeking to understand what happens to playful learning when children are 8, 9, or 10. There's an awful lot of government money going into play, but it's generally around playwork experiences, bringing play back into the community, back into before- and after-school clubs.

And there's parents' involvement in their children's learning. How will they pick up on these ideas of facilitating deep learning through play? Play classes for parents... ?

Pat: For me, understanding play is just like learning to read, or understanding mathematical concepts; it's an intellectual endeavour for adults. To understand it you've got to be taught about it in some shape or form, or experience it.

One school that I worked with recently used a lot of open-ended



play materials with the children outdoors in the playground – boxes, tarpaulins, tyres and big pieces of fabric. And I asked the teacher what parents thought about it when they saw it. The teacher said: 'You can tell they're a bit unsure about it, they've never seen a playground with these kinds of things in it before. But, they're starting to get a handle on it.' That teacher now talks to the parents about the children's play, which becomes a way of educating parents too; they understand and have insights into the importance of play and they tell the teacher what their children are playing with at home, so that home and school connect for the child.

And with the expansion of multi-agency working, there's a lot for people working in all aspects of children's services to learn. I know of an initiative due to be introduced in England that will train police and park keepers in children's play, so if they see a group of kids 'running riot' they can recognise if they're just mucking around, or if there's something more serious going on.

Pat: People are working towards it, slowly. It's an issue we're addressing in our university, because we train playworkers, teachers, youth workers, social workers and health visitors. We're thinking very hard about the extent to which our initial courses develop inter-professional opportunities – because we recognise that we're training the future workforce. We'll have to open their minds to dialogues with other professionals, and we need to think about that at the training stage.

The Children's Workforce Development Council [in England] is piloting a qualification framework for managers and leaders in play settings to help them to work in a more integrated way with schools, children's centres and others across the workforce... but we've a way to go before there is training for the school's workforce in the value of playwork principles.

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