Indicators of children’s wellbeing in activities defined by children as play or not play

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Objectives

- To identify the difficulties in defining both play and wellbeing
- To look at an alternative definition of play – playfulness
- To look at the evidence and benefits of linking playfulness and wellbeing
“play is believed to provide [children with] the opportunity to develop a sense of wellbeing” (DCSF, 2008, p1)
Theoretical background – the value of play

• Play is a universal activity, a necessary and vital aspect of life (Burghardt, 2005)

• Play viewed as essential for learning and development and underpins early years education and curriculum initiatives

• Evidence base is weak “the evidence for social and cognitive gains, and for the educational effectiveness of the ‘play way’ is limited” (BERA, 2003. p.15; Lester & Russell, 2008; Smith, 2009)

• Methodological weaknesses
  • Isolate play as causal determinant – play means different things to different people
  • Experimenter effects
The problem with evidencing play – what is it?

• Adult view of play
  – Category, criteria or continuum
  – Focus on the observable act
  – May look like play but not necessarily feel like play to the player

• But it is how play makes a player feel and behave which is important for learning and development (Moyles, 1989)
The problem with evidencing play – what is it?

• To understand play we need to take into account the child’s view of play (Sutton-Smith, 1987; Takhvar, 1988)

• Child’s view of play
  – Focus on what looks and feels like play to the player
  – Differentiate play, the observable act, from play or playfulness which may be viewed as an attitude of mind and approach to an activity (Bundy, 1997; Dewey 1933; Schwartzman 1982;)

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Children’s perceptions of play and work (1)

• “Children do not make a distinction between ‘play’ and ‘work’ and neither should practitioners’ (QCA, 2000. p.11)
• Small number of studies nationally and internationally
• Most studies employ interview or observational methodology (Karrby 1989; Wing 1995; Keating et al 2000)
• Problematic: subjective observation, observer influence, high cognitive load
• Experimental procedure – CAP (Howard 2002; Howard, Jenvey & Hill 2005; Parker 2007)
Children’s perceptions of play and work (2)

- Children do make a distinction between play and not play using environmental and emotional cues
- View play/not play on a continuum
- Differences between settings depending on experience
- Cues include: adult presence, location, voluntary nature of the task, locus of control and adult evaluation
- Ambiguous nature of ‘fun’
A concept of playfulness

- Playfulness as an attitude or approach to task (Dewey, 1933; Bundy, 1991; 2005)
- It is this that is important for development and learning (Moyles, 1989)
- Factors: enthusiasm, motivation, willingness to engage, freedom to choose, freedom to try out new ideas
- Utilising playfulness
Utilising a concept of playfulness experimentally

- Jigsaw puzzle activity - Thomas, Howard & Miles (2006); McInnes et al., (2009; 2010)
- Utilised children’s cues to provide formal and playful practice conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal Practice Condition</th>
<th>Playful Practice Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult present</td>
<td>Adult proximal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At table</td>
<td>On floor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No choice</td>
<td>Choice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Procedure – Pretest, Practice, Post-test, Delayed Post-test
- Findings – significant improvement for children in the playful practice condition
Evidence for the effectiveness of utilising a concept based on playfulness

- Children assigned to playful practice condition showed increased performance at post-test and delayed post-test measured as time taken to perform a task (Thomas et al, 2006; MclInnes et al, 2009; MclInnes et al, 2010)
Utilising a concept of playfulness experimentally

- Manipulated cue of adult presence - 4 different practice conditions
- Used problem solving tasks familiar to children – jigsaw puzzles and bead threading
- Followed the same procedure: pre-test, practice, post-test, delayed post-test

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Playful</th>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>Playful+adult</th>
<th>Formal-adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult proximal</td>
<td>Adult present</td>
<td>Adult present</td>
<td>Adult proximal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor</td>
<td>Table</td>
<td>Floor</td>
<td>Table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>No choice</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>No choice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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- Findings:
  - significant improvement for children in the adult proximal practice conditions
Evidence for the effectiveness of utilising a concept based on playfulness

- Children assigned to adult proximal practice conditions showed increased performance at post-test and delayed post-test measured as time taken to perform a task and errors made on a task (McInnes, 2010;)

Average performance at each experimental stage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experimental stage</th>
<th>Adult present</th>
<th>Adult proximal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed post-test</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average errors made at each experimental stage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experimental stage</th>
<th>Adult present</th>
<th>Adult proximal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Wellbeing

- Wellbeing is an historical and widely used concept (Statham & Chase, 2010)
- Wellbeing is viewed as important for learning and is embedded within policy and curriculum documentation (DfES, 2003; DfES, 2007; WAG, 2008)
- Difficult to define: means different things to different people (Ereaut & Whiting, 2008; Watson et al., in press)
- Gaps in data, understanding and “what constitutes a ‘good’ childhood” (Statham & Chase, 2010)
Children’s views of wellbeing

• How do children view wellbeing?

• Studies on older children’s views of wellbeing (Fattore, 2006; Layard & Dunn, 2009; Sixsmith et al, 2007)

• Indicators include:
  – Positive sense of self (motivated, enthusiastic…)
  – Choice and autonomy
  – Feeling happy

• Some of these indicators are ones children use to differentiate play and not play situations, links with playfulness factors

• Lack of studies on younger children’s perspectives of wellbeing – a difficult concept to ask them about
Involvement as a measure of wellbeing

- Within the Experiential Education programme wellbeing is linked with the concept of involvement (Laevers, 2008)

- Involvement is based on flow states and indicators include:
  - Deep concentration
  - Strong motivation
  - Fascination
  - Satisfaction
  - Positive energy

- These indicators overlap with indicators of wellbeing used by older children

- Measured using the Leuven Involvement Scale – 5 part scale (1 = no involvement, 5 = sustained involvement)
Playfulness and wellbeing study

• Sample
  – Series of three studies
  – 3 early years settings – nursery school, infants school, primary school
  – 129 children in total (56 male and 73 female) randomly allocated to playful and non-playful practice conditions

• Procedure
  – 2 convergent problem solving tasks
  – 3rd study manipulate cue of adult presence
  – Pretest, Practice, Post-test, Delayed Post-test procedure
  – Video whole procedure
  – Measure involvement and aspects of behaviour
  – Children rate practice condition as play
Findings – involvement

- Children in the playful practice conditions significantly more involved compared to the non-playful practice conditions ($t = 6.13, p < 0.05$)
- In the 3rd study children in the adult proximal practice conditions scored significantly higher than children in the adult present practice conditions ($t = 4.89, df = 54, p < .001$)
- Means: Playful (4.33), Formal with adult proximal (4.00), Playful with adult present (3.29), Formal (2.64)
### Differences in behaviour – practice data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Playful practice conditions</th>
<th>Formal practice conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Other movements</td>
<td>• Sit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lean to puzzle</td>
<td>• Upright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fidget</td>
<td>• Still</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Look at pieces</td>
<td>• Negative vocalisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Smile</td>
<td>• More language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speak less</td>
<td>– To distract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– To help self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Persevere more with incorrect placements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Differences in behaviour continued into post-test and delayed post-test
- No differences between boys and girls
Findings – play rating

• Significant association between practice condition and play rating ($\chi^2 = 30.23$, df = 2, < .05)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Bit play</th>
<th>Not play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playful practice</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>condition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-playful</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practice condition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Children in the playful practice conditions more likely to rate the practice condition as play
Conclusions

- The cues children use to define play and not play situations, indicators for wellbeing used by older children and indicators of involvement overlap
- Manipulating the cues children use to define play and not play situations produces differences in involvement and related behaviors
- Taken together, manipulating the cues children use to define play and not play situations results in differences in children’s wellbeing as measured by the Leuven Involvement Scale
- The role of the adult is important for children’s sense of wellbeing
- This has implications for practice
Any questions?