

*Perceptions of Play and Playfulness: Implications for
the implementation of the Foundation Phase in
Wales*

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Background

Play is a central feature of the Foundation Phase framework currently being implemented by the Welsh Assembly Government (ACCAC, 2004). Previous curriculum initiatives in the UK have also centralised play (e.g. CACE; 1967, ACCAC, 1996; QCA, 2000) and ecosystemic analyses have revealed barriers to successful practice (e.g. Howard, 2002a). Evaluations suggest differences in classroom practice relating to play, despite everyone working towards the same curricula objectives (Sylva et al., 1999). Building on previous research findings, we suggest that the successful implementation of play based curricula might be enhanced by understanding children's perceptions of what constitutes play and in particular, the relationship between these perceptions and children's classroom experiences. The aim of the proposed research is to investigate teacher understandings of play, types of play practice and children's subsequent perceptions of their early years experiences in relation to the provision of genuinely playful environments.

It has been argued that the quest to define play has constrained practitioners, narrowing classroom provision to experiences that 'look like play' in

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order to fulfil curriculum requirements (Wood and Attfield, 1996). Play has proven to be a relatively illusive concept and definitions have tended to be based on adult frames of reference and observations, although theorists and practitioners stress the importance of providing activities that children themselves feel are play (Lieberman, 1977; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Howard, 2002). For example, whilst adult definitions of play see happiness and fun as important observable cues to play, children themselves often don't refer to this as an important feature (King, 1979).

Studies that have elicited children's perceptions of play demonstrate that children determine the nature of their classroom activities using cues such as where and with whom an activity takes place and the level of control they are afforded in choosing and directing the task. In particular, children are often less likely to see an activity as playful if an adult is present, if an activity occurs at the table or if they are directed to the task rather than choosing it for themselves (Howard, 2002; Howard et al., 2006; Wing, 1995). Even more pertinent is that these perceptions of play are influenced by classroom experiences such as whether children are used to adult involvement in play activity and whether play occurs at predetermined times and locations (Karrby, 1989; Wing, 1995; Howard, 2002; Westcott and Howard, 2007). Further experimental research manipulating the cues children use to define play (level of choice afforded, whether the activity takes place on the floor or at a table and whether or not an adult is present), has revealed that children perform significantly better on problem solving, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy tasks when they are practised in playful conditions (e.g. Thomas, Howard and Miles, 2006). Detailed behavioural analysis of video recordings of children engaging in these playful or formal practice conditions also highlights important differences in terms of engagement, levels of distraction and fluidity in problem solving strategies (McInnes et al., 2009).

Teachers have an important role in shaping children's perceptions of play in the Foundation Phase. Children's perceptions are influenced by social and environmental interaction. Their sensitivity to the cues they use to define play has been demonstrated by superior performance on tasks practised playfully. The success of play based curricula may rest on our ability to maximise on the affective qualities of play, rather than types of play or play as an observed behaviour (Howard, 2009). When children perceive an activity as play they are engaged, less distracted and try out more combinations of behaviour. The fear free experience protects and promotes well being, a core element of the Foundation Phase leading to development across domains.

In an evaluation of the Foundation Phase, Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2007) suggested that there was a need to 'develop and maintain play based ... pedagogies ... that involve adult guided play' and that in pilot projects quality interaction had reduced (p. 8). To maximise the developmental potential of play and facilitate the role of adults as cooperative play partners we need to understand and build upon the perceptions of the players themselves (Howard, 2002; Ceglowski, 1998). Without this, we cannot be sure that the environments are perceived as playful or that the fundamental developmental potential of play is being maximised.

Design

The proposed eighteen-month project aims to track teacher understandings of play and their role within the foundation phase, identify typologies of play practice and investigate the relationship between these and children's perceptions of their early years experiences and well being.

We aim to target a demographically and geographically representative sample of schools across mid, south and west Wales (including Welsh medium provision). Using a sequential mixed method approach we anticipate consideration of the following questions

- what do teachers understand by play and their role in this within the Foundation Phase?
- what are the origins of this understanding?
- what types of play practice can be observed?
- how does this practice (in relation to social and environmental interaction) relate to children's perceptions of their early years experiences and their sense of well being?

A graphical representation of the project is provided in Figure 1. Phase one of the project will involve interviewing a substantial sample (more than 100) of teachers involved in the delivery of the Foundation Phase. Thematic analysis of these interviews will contribute to the development of a typology of play practice. In phase two, a smaller sample based on this typology will be selected for detailed observation in order to investigate the nature of pedagogic interaction. Phase two will also involve eliciting children's perceptions of play and well being using developmentally appropriate, pictorial method-

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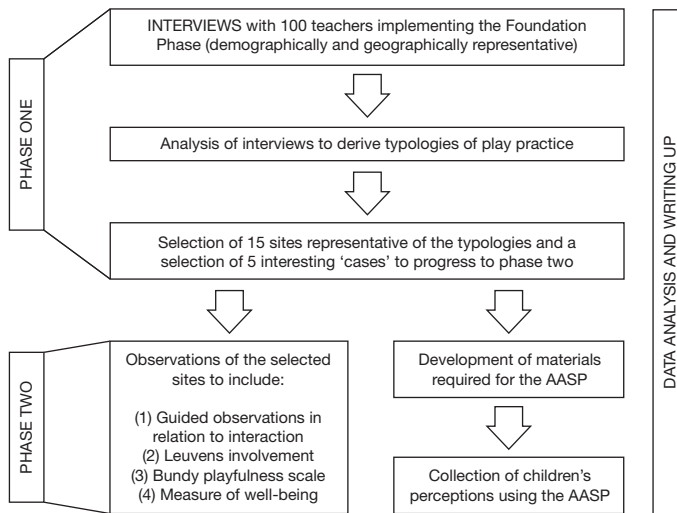


Figure 1
Graphical representation of the project

ologies (e.g. AASP). These data will be analysed together with the interviews from phase one.

The design utilises a sequential mixed method approach and data is triangulated for comprehensive analyses in both qualitative and quantitative forms. The substantial set of interviews during phase one form the basis of the initial analysis which subsequently informs the selection of sites via the practice typology. The way in which each of the research questions is addressed by the various methodologies we intend to employ is presented in Figure 2.

Impact of the proposed research and future directions

The proposed research has implications from the perspective of research, policy and practice. As the brief literature review here has indicated, understanding children's perceptions of play may prove critical in the successful implementation of play based curricula such as the Foundation Phase in Wales, as it facilitates the provision of genuinely playful experiences. Initial

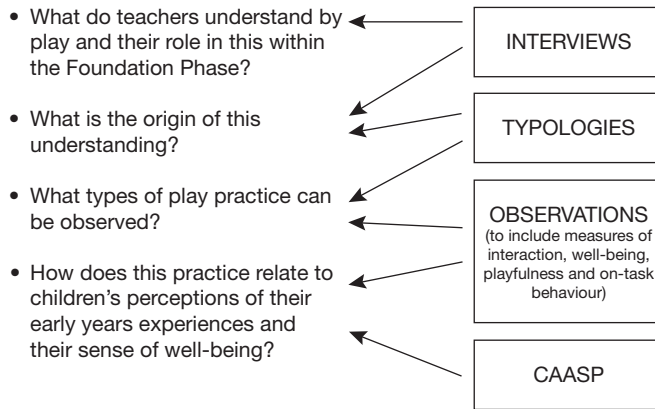


Figure 2
The relationship between research methodology and questions posed

research indicates that such practice positively impacts on the potential of play to promote learning and development. Crucially, the research will also help practitioners to understand how they might become engaged with children as co-operative play partners. From a theoretical perspective, the research will add further weight to theoretical models of play that emphasise its affective qualities (Howard and Miles, forthcoming). Cumulatively, all of these things have the potential to inform policy relating to play across multiple settings, particularly in relation to the provision of evidence based practice.

Reflection on our involvement in the WERN scheme

Building research capacity: The experience of being involved in the WERN bursary scheme has been very beneficial. We have come together as a group of academics from three Welsh institutions with differing backgrounds and various levels of research experience. Our team comprises two psychologists and an educationalist but we share a common interest in the developmental potential of play in the early years. It has been stimulating to discuss our various paradigmatic positions and conceptual understandings. Of particular

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benefit has been the opportunity to work in a multi-disciplinary team that not only comprises academics with a research background but also those with practitioner insight into the practicalities of the curriculum. The events organised by the WERN committee, such as the funding workshop in Newport and the conference in Llandrindod Wells, also provided an opportunity to forge links with colleagues within the wider academic community of Wales.

Academic outcomes: We have yet to submit our bid. We are awaiting editorial feedback on key publications that we feel will add significant strength to the proposal. Individually and collectively, the WERN scheme has led to a range of different academic outcomes that make a positive contribution to the development of our academic careers. These include:

- a presentation made at the WERN conference in Llandrindod Wells
- a paper presented at a play colloquium organised by BERA and TACTYC
- an edited book accepted for publication by Sage, focusing on current research surrounding play in the early years (editors Pat Broadhead, Liz Wood and Justine Howard)
- a paper submitted to the British Journal of Educational and Child Psychology
- the organisation of a symposia on play at the forthcoming BPS Psychology of Education Section annual conference
- the preparation of a theoretical manuscript integrating findings surrounding children's perceptions of play focusing on thresholds and behavioural fluency

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