

Developmentally appropriate practice and play-based pedagogy in early years education

A literature review of research and practice

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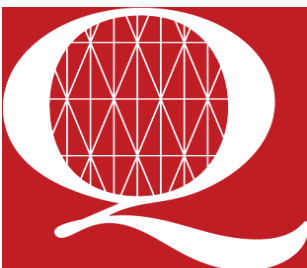


Table of Contents

	Page
1. The scope and purpose of the review	3
2. The context for the review	3
2.1 <i>An emerging consensus on early years curriculum and pedagogy</i>	4
2.2 <i>Definitions and explanatory points</i>	6
3. Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), its theoretical roots and associated empirical research	8
3.1 <i>The theoretical background of the DAP guidelines</i>	9
3.2 <i>Research and developmentally appropriate practice</i>	10
4. Learning and teaching through play	13
4.1 <i>Rethinking play as pedagogy</i>	14
4.2 <i>The role of adults in children's play</i>	14
4.3 <i>Peer interactions and children's play</i>	17
5. Educational transitions	19
5.1 <i>Child characteristics and successful transitions</i>	20
5.2 <i>Parent, family and community characteristics</i>	20
5.3 <i>The role of the teacher and the school</i>	20
5.4 <i>Progression and transitions</i>	21
6. Conclusion: Towards a more integrated approach to pedagogy in the early years	21
References	24

1. The scope and purpose of the review

This review is part of a larger Guidance Pack, which is designed to help teachers become more confident and competent practitioners, working in the context of a play-based, developmentally appropriate and informal curriculum. The review aims to introduce the interested reader to theory and research about play-based pedagogies, and the significance of ‘developmentally appropriate’ practice as discussed and debated in the early years research literature. The focus of the review is on the re-thinking of these concepts, and the challenges to their meaning, that have emerged in the scholarly literature over the past 10 years or so. In particular, there has been a notable shift in theoretical perspective about the nature of children’s learning, from an ‘ages and stages’ developmental perspective (usually associated with Piaget) to an increased appreciation of the role of adults in scaffolding and co-constructing learning with children (usually associated with Vygotsky), and of the importance of social and cultural influences on children’s learning. In addition, the expansion of early years pre-school provision in the UK has heightened awareness of the importance of providing continuity and coherence in children’s early development and learning, and has led to a renewed research interest in the factors that positively influence children as they move through educational phases.

Following an initial introductory section, the literature review is divided into three main parts that describe:

- Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), its theoretical roots and the associated empirical research;
- New thinking about the role of play in learning, the role of the adult-child interactions and peer interactions;
- The importance of effectively managing children’s learning progression and transitions as they move from pre-school settings into early primary school classes, and subsequently into more structured modes of teaching.

2. The context for the review

Both nationally and internationally, there is a general movement to recognise early years education as a distinctive phase in children’s learning, that should be characterised by a curriculum that focuses on whole-child learning, and by teaching methods that are appropriate for young children (OECD, 2001). The term ‘early years’ is now used to cover children from birth to 8 years of age, and early years education normally covers children from 3 to 8 years (depending on the country), thus spanning pre-school provision and the first years of statutory primary school education. Because of differences in the age at which schooling becomes statutory in different countries, the transition to primary school happens at different ages for children in different countries. This makes international comparisons quite confusing. Table 1 shows the statutory ages for primary school in Europe. Northern Ireland children begin compulsory school earlier than any other children in Europe.

However, in most of these countries, many children start pre-school earlier, either by choice or by law. Even in the UK, the picture is complicated. For example, almost 100% of children in England enter reception classes in school settings from age 4y 4m upwards, thus effectively beginning school one year earlier than the statutory requirement. In the Republic of Ireland, although primary school is not compulsory until age 6, most children enter ‘infant classes’ in school settings two years earlier and follow a prescribed curriculum.

In most countries, tensions exist between the pedagogical traditions of pre-school, which tend to adopt play-based and

informal approaches to learning and the more formal or subject-oriented curriculum framework of primary school. For the UK, Wood and Bennett (1999) characterised the formal approach as being predominantly teacher-led, with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, learning through repetition and practice to achieve mastery and competence. In contrast, an informal approach promotes play and story sessions as the primary media for learning, offers children choices and alternative activities to encourage children's independence in learning, and advocates a balance between child-initiated activities and teacher/practitioner guidance.

Table 1: Statutory school starting ages in Europe (c.f. Sharp, 2002)

Age	Country
Four	Northern Ireland
Five	England, Malta, Netherlands, Scotland, Wales
Six	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey
Seven	Bulgaria, Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden

In the UK, there has been a strong feeling that high-stakes testing has contributed to the downward pressure of an academic curriculum and a formal teaching approach into the early years. In response to this critique, and to international and national reviews and enquiries (e.g. POST, 2000; OECD Starting Strong, 2001; BERA [Early Years SIG], 2003; OECD Starting Strong II, 2006; Stephen, 2006; Dockett et al, 2007), all nations in the UK are now moving, or have moved, their policies in the direction of a more child-oriented approach to teaching and learning in the early school years. Each has adopted slightly different policies and practices to ease the transition between pre-school and statutory schooling¹ (The Foundation Stage in Wales, 3-7 year olds; The Early Years Foundation Stage in England, 0-5 year olds; The Foundation Stage in the Northern Ireland Curriculum, 4-6 year olds). There is a renewed emphasis on articulating and aligning the expectations for children in preschools and in early primary school classes. The changes in the early years primary curriculum have taken place in the context of more extensive 4-14 curriculum reviews in all four nations in the UK.

2.1. An emerging consensus on early years curriculum and pedagogy

As part of an INCA (International Review of Curriculum and Assessment), Bertram and Pascal (2002) reviewed the early years curriculum, pedagogical and assessment approaches of 20 different countries across the world (Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, Hungary, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, USA, Wales, and Hong Kong). Despite differences in the specific curriculum models (e.g., Developmentally Appropriate Practice, Froebel, High Scope, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Steiner, Te Whariki), there was a strong consensus about the curriculum principles for 3-6 year olds. These

¹ Websites for each part of the UK —

Northern Ireland: http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/foundation_stage,

England: <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/evfs/>

Wales: http://wales.gov.uk/dcells/publications/curriculum_and_assessment/arevisedcurriculumforwales/foundationphase/foundtation2008-e.pdf?lang=en

Scotland: <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/earlyyears/about/index.asp>

were:

- a child-centred, flexible and individually responsive curriculum;
- the importance of working in partnership with parents;
- the need to offer broad and relevant learning experiences in an integrated manner;
- the importance of play and active, exploratory learning;
- an emphasis on social and emotional development; and
- the need to empower the child to be an autonomous, independent learner.

Bertram and Pascal (2002, Section 3.3, p. 21)

In terms of curriculum organisation, most countries used areas of learning, a few used activities, and no country used disciplines or subjects. The areas of learning that were most commonly identified were: social and emotional; cultural, aesthetic and creative; physical; environmental; language and literacy; and numeracy. Many countries emphasised cultural traditions and aimed to enhance social cohesiveness through the curriculum. Only three countries emphasised early literacy and numeracy within the early years curriculum (Tasmania, USA, and England).

There was overwhelming consistency within the review countries as to the recommended pedagogical approach in the early years.

- This emphasised an interactional pedagogy, where the children and adults operated in reciprocity with one another.
- There was an encouragement of play-based, first hand, exploratory experiences which provided children with opportunities to talk and interact.
- The provision of opportunities for children to self-manage and self-direct their learning was also encouraged.
- Collaborative, peer group learning was the preferred model, with whole class teaching or circle time being used selectively to support this.
- The role of the adult was generally viewed as being to facilitate and support learning through skilful and guided interaction, adopting a flexible range of teaching and learning strategies according to the needs of the children.
- Some countries specifically discouraged the use of early disciplinary and prescriptive methods of instruction, for example, Italy, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and Sweden.

Bertram and Pascal (2002, Section 3.6, p. 22)

At this stage, it is important to emphasise that the international surveys of early years practices and policies referred mostly to pre-statutory school settings, which cater for children up to 6 years, in the vast majority of the countries included in the reviews. In contrast, when the Northern Ireland Curriculum was introduced in 1990 the compulsory school age was lowered and children as young as four-year and two months were required to follow the common curriculum for Key Stage One in primary schools. However, this did not necessarily mean that the children were expected to miss out on the benefits of the pedagogical approaches recommended by Bertram and Pascal. Indeed, the

need to maintain developmentally appropriate teaching methods in the first year of primary schooling was acknowledged in a 1990 circular from the Department of Education (DENI, 1990). This circular stressed that the Department had not altered its views on the nature and type of learning experiences which they considered were appropriate for 4-year old children and on the conditions in which learning should take place. The circular emphasized that:

The requirement to provide the common curriculum does not remove the responsibility on schools to provide these children with ample opportunity for active learning through play and for free movement both indoors and outdoors. A wide variety of materials should be available and presented in a way, which will engage the children's interest and encourage exploration. The experiences offered should promote the development of the children's language and establish the foundations for the development of early mathematical and scientific concepts. For these young children, reading, writing and mathematics should be approached through informal rather than formal activities. (DENI, 1990, Circular Number 1990/27).

Although the need for a play-based approach to teaching in the early years was officially sanctioned, systematic observations of Year 1 classrooms in primary schools in Northern Ireland in the late 1990s, reported by Walsh et al. (2006), indicated that the teaching approach was much more formal than either the consensus identified in the INCA review, or the expectations as outlined in the DENI circular.

International comparisons, and general dissatisfactions with the formality of the early primary school curriculum in Northern Ireland, were among the main drivers behind the schools' engagement with the Enriched Curriculum from 2000 onwards. In 2007, the introduction of the new Northern Ireland curriculum included a Foundation Stage for the first two years of primary education. The Foundation curriculum, which was informed by the practice that had been evaluated and refined through the Early Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation Project (EYCEP), aims to make the transition from pre-school to primary school easier and encourages children to be active learners. It maintains the view that young children learn best when learning is interactive, practical and enjoyable for both children and teachers and also that children should experience much of their learning through well-planned and challenging play.

The purpose of this review is to update the reader on changing viewpoints, new research and new thinking that has emerged in the past 10 years or so, since the beginning of the Enriched Curriculum.

2.2. Definitions and explanatory points

This review is a selective account of a small number of topics. Although there is a large body of literature on early years pedagogy, an influential review conducted by the British Educational Research Association in 2003 (BERA, 2003) concluded that there was little hard evidence to guide policy and practice, or inform debate, about the efficacy of developmentally appropriate practice as compared with didactic approaches to early years pedagogy. Since then, there has been a considerable growth of research on early years provision. Nevertheless, the evidence base to reach firm conclusions with regard to the impact of developmentally appropriate practice for children's learning and development, particularly in the longer term, is still very small.

The aim of the review is to distil the newly emerging evidence on developmentally appropriate practice, play-based pedagogies and transitions in the early years, in order to inform practice. Each of these topics has been subject to extensive recent academic debate and empirical research, which are summarized in reviews (e.g. Wood, 2007a; NAEYC, 2009; Stephen, 2010a, 2010b). It is clear that writers adopt different perspectives; diverse ideologies, values

and emotions underpin distinctions that can get lost as a consensus is reached among educators. For example, until recently the use of the term 'pedagogy' was contested in the UK, and Siraj-Blatchford (1999) described some early years practitioners as 'recoiling' at the term 'pedagogy' which they associated with direct teaching. However, there is now a broad acceptance in the literature of the use of the term 'pedagogy', defined by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002), as

"That set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context. It refers to the interactive processes between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (which includes the concrete learning environment, the family and community)". (p.28)

Other terms and concepts associated with pedagogy that have also been the focus of considerable debate include the term 'child-centred' and the metaphor of 'scaffolding' to describe the role of adults in guiding children's learning and development. For example, from an extensive review of contemporary early childhood literature, Chung and Walsh (2000) identified 40 different meanings of the term 'child-centred', ranging from learning based on children's interests, to children's participation in decisions related to their learning, to an emphasis on developmental stages, to the development of individual potential. Commenting on this analysis, Stephen (2010a) concluded that

"when a concept is variously interpreted it is difficult to sustain the argument that it is pivotal to the success of children's learning"

Also, the weight of the evidence emerging from both classrooms observation studies and longitudinal evaluations suggests that a balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated learning activities is most effective in terms of cognitive, social and dispositional outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, see later sections).

The concept of scaffolding in relation to teaching is said to provide an effective conceptual metaphor for the quality of teacher intervention and to resonate with teachers' intuitive conceptions of what it means to intervene in children's learning (Hammond & Gibbons, 2001; Verenikina, 2003; Pea, 2004; Lajoie, 2005). The definition of scaffolding is associated with Vygotsky's (1978) conception of the zone of proximal development defined as

"the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86).

Accordingly, the term scaffolding is used to describe a process in which a child or novice is assisted to achieve a task that they may not be able to achieve if unassisted, until they are able to perform the task on their own. The implication is that individuals have a learning potential that can be reached with appropriate scaffolding provided by tutors, parents, teachers, and peers. Consequently, it is equally appropriate to refer to the scaffolding of teachers' work, with appropriate guidelines or interactions with mentors and peers, as it is to use the term scaffolding to describe the role of the teacher in interaction with young children in the classroom.

There has also been considerable debate about the characteristics that constitute successful scaffolding. Although the term is mainly associated with Vygotskian socio-cultural theory, and the concept of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), Verenikina argued that

"some interpretations of scaffolding seem to have drifted away from the Vygotskian view of teaching and learning and appear to have become an umbrella term for any kind of teacher support."

Indeed, Verenikina found that without its theoretical context, scaffolding tended to be interpreted as a form of direct

instruction, in contrast to the Vygotskian idea of teaching as co-construction of knowledge within child-initiated activities. In terms of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, learning is a social process that occurs in the interactions between individuals. The theory built upon the Piagetian idea of the child as an active learner but with the emphasis on the role of social interaction in learning and development. For Vygotsky, the quality of child-adult interaction is crucial in assisting children's learning

A short review cannot do justice to the wide range of scholarship involved in the debates around early years pedagogy. Nevertheless, the discourse associated with these three terms connected with early years practice — pedagogy, child-centered, scaffolding — highlights the complexity of analyzing the teacher's role. At the same time, the discussions also help to make explicit some of the specialised knowledge involved in teaching in the early years and the importance of teachers' classroom organization and interactions for children's development and learning.

3. Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), its theoretical roots and the associated empirical research

Until recently the idea of pedagogy was rarely discussed in the UK educational literature (Watkins & Mortimore, 1999; Adams et al., 2004; Stephen, 2010a) and official guidance for schools tended to focus on the content of the curriculum, and the associated desired learning outcomes (Alexander, 2009). In this context, when Siraj-Blatchford (1999) contributed to a volume (Watkins & Mortimore, 1999) designed to encourage debate about teaching in the United Kingdom, she turned to the Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) framework developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), an American professional body, for those involved with children from birth to eight. Although this US framework continues to be highly influential, it is not widely acknowledged in the debate about early years in the United Kingdom, even though it continues to promote research and practices that reflect current theoretical understanding about effective pedagogical practices.

The DAP framework was first described in the 1980s when the NAEYC, which accredits programmes that provide care and education, began to specify appropriate practices for children of different ages. Their work was guided by research and in turn promoted considerable debate and research on pedagogy that addresses issues that are applicable to a wide range of early years settings. The term "developmentally appropriate practice" (DAP) was adopted in 1986 with the publication of guidelines and a NAEYC position statement (NAEYC, 1986; Bredekamp, 1987). These guidelines were revised 10 years later (NAEYC, 1996; Bredekamp & Copple 1997) and again in 2009 (NAEYC, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) following intensive debate and consultation in the light of a changing political context and the growing knowledge about child development and the role of early years education.

Although the term, 'developmentally appropriate practice' originated in the USA, similar orientations toward child-oriented, play-based educational practices have roots in countries all over the world (for reviews, see Siraj-Blatchford, 1999; Bertram & Pascal, 2002; Stephen, 2006; OECD, 2006; Dockett et al, 2007). These curricula include:

- Experiential education, in Belgium and the Netherlands (Laevers, 2000), which emphasises the emotional well-being and "involvement" of children in learning;
- The Reggio Emilia approach, in northern Italy and elsewhere (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998; Rinaldi, 2005), in which children are viewed as co-constructing their understanding of a subject through reciprocal

interactions with teachers and peers;

- Te Whariki, in New Zealand (May & Carr, 1997; Carr & May, 2000), an explicitly socio-cultural approach aimed at nurturing children's particular cultural roots (reflecting the need for both Maori and European heritage to be valued in that country);
- The Swedish National Curriculum (Alvstad & Samuelsson, 1999), which avoids detailed curricular guidance in favour of a high degree of autonomy for local schools and communities.

According to Stephen (2006), despite their differing conceptual and cultural origins these curricula share some common features.

‘They have an holistic view of learning and the learner, stress active or experiential learning, respect children’s ability to be self-motivating and directing and value responsive interactions between children and adults as crucial for learning.’ (p. 15)

Closer to home, ideas about developmentally appropriate practice have influenced the introduction of the Foundation Stage in England (Sylva & Pugh, 2005), and the Enriched Curriculum and Foundation Stage in Northern Ireland (Walsh et al., 2006; CCEA, 2007).

3.1 *The theoretical background of the DAP guidelines*

According to the authors (Bredekamp, 1987, Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), the original NAEYC guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) were firmly based on developmental theory. At that time, more attention was given to the cognitive constructivist perspective of Piaget than to the social and cultural context of development that Vygotsky recognized (Van Horn & Ramey, 2003). The recent revision of the DAP guidelines (NAEYC, 2009) now acknowledges both of these perspectives in 12 principles of learning and practice derived from the most up-to-date theoretical and empirical accounts of developmental processes and sociocultural influences. These are briefly:

- All domains of development and learning — physical, social and emotional, and cognitive — are related.
- Children follow well-documented sequences to build knowledge.
- Children develop and learn at varying rates.
- Learning develops from the dynamic interaction of biological maturation and experience.
- Early childhood experiences can have profound effects, and optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning.
- Development proceeds toward greater complexity and self-regulation.
- Children thrive with secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults.
- Multiple social and cultural contexts influence learning and development.
- Children learn in a variety of ways, so teachers need a range of strategies.
- Play helps develop self-regulation, language, cognition, and social competence.
- Children advance when challenged just beyond their current level of mastery.
- Children’s experiences shape their motivation, which in turn affects their learning.

These principles highlight how individual variation in development and learning should be linked to decisions about the curriculum, teaching and interactions to ensure that teaching decisions take account of the uniqueness of each child as well as group differences in temperament, growth rate, personality and background. Other principles balance the focus on the individual by highlighting the importance of secure social relationships with responsive adults and multiple social and cultural settings for child development and growth. In this context, the benefits of positive teacher–child relationships and cultural sensitivity in the classroom for children’s learning and the development of social competence and emotional well-being are self-evident.

The Vygotskian view of teaching is an important component of the 2009 NAEYC DAP guidelines and scaffolding is seen as a key feature of effective teaching but one of the principles also suggests that:

children benefit when teachers have at their disposal a wide range of teaching strategies and from these teachers select the best strategy to use in a situation, depending on the learning goal, specific context and needs of individual children at that moment including children who may need much more support than others even in exploration and play (NAEYC, 2009, p.14)

The 12 principles of learning and practice provide a strong foundation for the NAEYC guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice, which complement the guidance, provided by the four UK national educational systems. The NAEYC position statement highlights the importance of teachers to high quality early education and it stresses the importance of teachers’ decision-making for effective teaching. It suggests that the long-term and short-term decisions which early years teachers make every day will be developmentally appropriate if they take account of

- what is known about child development and learning (e.g., knowledge of age-related characteristics and appropriate teaching strategies);
- what is known about each child as an individual (e.g., knowledge based on observation and assessment that enables the teacher to adapt and be responsive to that individual variation); and
- what is known about the social and cultural contexts in which children live (i.e. the values and conventions of the children’s families and communities).

That is why it goes on to point out that:

“A teacher’s moment-to-moment actions and interactions with children are the most powerful determinant of learning outcomes and development. Curriculum is very important, but what the teacher does is paramount.” (NAEYC, 2009 Key Messages)

3.2. Research and developmentally appropriate practice

Despite its influence, the concept of developmentally appropriate practice has been critiqued from several different directions over the past 25 years. Some of these criticisms derive from false assumptions (Kostelnik, 2003), including the idea that there is only one right way to implement a developmentally appropriate curriculum or the belief, based on a maturationist understanding of human development, i.e. that developmentally appropriate practice involves minimal involvement from the teacher. Other criticisms have been addressed in the revisions of the DAP framework including concerns about the failure to attend to cultural issues, and the weak theoretical basis (NAEYC, 2009). However, despite being firmly based in developmental research, there is still some justification in the criticism that insufficient research attention has been paid to how the DAP guidelines are translated into day-to-day classroom practice, and that there is limited and equivocal empirical evidence of the effectiveness of DAP on children’s longer

term learning and school achievements (Van Horn & Ramey, 2003; Van Horn et al, 2005).

Research on DAP can be divided into two broad categories:

- descriptive studies have explored how DAP is implemented in early education settings and what factors are associated with the use of DAP in different settings; and
- effectiveness studies have aimed to establish the effectiveness of DAPS for a wide range of short and long term emotional, cognitive and academic outcomes.

DAP, in common with any pedagogical approach, is a framework and has to be translated into practice. A number of studies have revealed a gap between teachers' actual classroom practices and their stated beliefs in developmentally appropriate practices (Maxwell et al, 2001) and wide differences in how guidelines are interpreted in different classrooms (Stephen, Ellis & Martlew, 2009). Goldstein (1997, 2007) documented cases in which kindergarten teachers seemed to adopt developmentally appropriate practices only partially, caught between a strong belief in the general principles of DAP, and the demands of administrators, parents and other teachers to raise academic standards (see also Charlesworth et al., 1991). Wien (1996) argued that the rigid organization of time as a "production schedule", making it seem like a scarce resource, can limit the ability of teachers to respond to young children in developmentally appropriate ways, in particular by hampering teachers' intentional planning of activities (see also Epstein, 2006, Goldstein, 2007). Other writers suggest that teacher practices may be constrained by their lack of knowledge of child development (Bodrova & Leong, 2001), emphasizing the need for continuing professional development of early years teachers. As the NAEYC (2009) noted

To ensure that teachers are able to provide care and education of high quality, they must be well prepared, participate in ongoing professional development, and receive sufficient support and compensation. (NAEYC, 2009 Key Messages)

Much of the initial impetus towards developmentally appropriate practice came from worries that young children were being unduly stressed by an over-emphasis on formal learning. Research found that children in developmentally appropriate classrooms — especially boys — suffered considerably less stress, and enjoyed improvements in motivation and emotional development, when compared to children in more traditional classrooms (Dunn & Kontos, 1997; Van Horn et al, 2005; NAEYC, 2009). This is important from the point of view of a child-centred approach, which views childhood as valuable in its own right and not just as a form of preparation for adulthood.

The evaluation of the Enriched Curriculum in Northern Ireland (McGuinness et al, 2009a, 2009b; Sproule et al, 2009) is one of the few studies that has assessed the long-term impact of a developmentally appropriate curriculum on psychosocial as well as academic outcomes. It found that the impact of the Enriched Curriculum class in the early years had statistically significant positive effects on the pupils' learning dispositions and attitudes as they progressed into Key Stage 2; this was particularly true as the children got older. Compared to control classes in Year 7, EC pupils had stronger beliefs that they could influence their future learning through their own efforts; they were more motivated through interest and the desire to improve their knowledge and skills; they were more curious; and they were prepared to accept more mental challenge and take on more difficult work.

The results of research on the impact of DAP on academic and cognitive outcomes are mixed. Some of the strongest evidence of the positive impact on DAP on child development is provided indirectly from international comparisons of

achievement. For example, the Cambridge Primary Review (2009) pointed out that in 14 of the 15 countries that scored higher than England in a major study of literacy and numeracy in 2006 (PISA), children did not start school until they were six or seven. In addition, more children in most of these countries than in England were found to read for pleasure. The later starting school age in these countries is taken as evidence that keeping young children in pre-school and kindergarten educational settings for longer periods does not adversely affect their literacy and numeracy development and may even be advantageous.

Nevertheless, when Van Horn et al. (2005) set out to bring together US research that directly investigated the academic and cognitive effects of DAP compared to more formal pedagogical practices in early years, they found the research was limited by a range of methodological shortcomings. Most studies that they identified were constrained by small sample size, inadequate outcome measures and inappropriate statistical tests. Only one large scale study included in the review examined the relation of DAP to academic outcomes using appropriate multi-level and longitudinal techniques. This study by Van Horn and Ramey (2003) found no consistent relations between DAP and any of the outcomes. More recently, Barnett et al. (2008) used a randomised controlled trial to evaluate the Tools of the Mind (Bodrova & Leong, 2001) play-based curriculum (see section 3). In this well-designed study, the 'Tools' curriculum, as compared to standard practice in pre-schools, improved the classroom experience of children as measured on a range of scales. In a follow-up study, Diamond et al (2007) reported a significant impact of the Tools of the Mind curriculum on executive functions such as working memory and cognitive flexibility, which are strongly related to school readiness.

The evaluation of the long-term impact of the Enriched Curriculum from Year 3 to Year 7 (McGuinness et al, 2009a, 2009b; Sproule et al, 2009), found that the vast majority of comparisons revealed no statistically significant differences in the reading and mathematical test performances of children from Enriched Curriculum classes and their controls. However, a more detailed analysis of children from schools serving areas of high social and economic deprivation showed that once the Enriched Curriculum had bedded down, it began to have a distinctive positive effect on outcomes for children as they progressed up the school. Given the mixed research findings and the limited research base, further high quality research is required in order to establish the links between classroom practices and specific academic outcomes over the long-term as well as the short-term.

One of the few detailed research examinations of the kind of pedagogy, practice and curriculum that predicts positive cognitive and social/behavioural development outcomes was carried out in the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). This study was part of their major longitudinal EPPE (Effective Provision for Pre-school Education) study in England, and the related study (EPPNI) in Northern Ireland. From case studies that were carried out in pre-school settings in England, the REPEY team concluded that the most effective teachers/practitioners:

- engaged children in interactions that showed sustained shared thinking;
- showed a good understanding of the content of curriculum areas;
- encouraged children to engage with cognitive challenge;
- had a repertoire of pedagogical activity (including direct instruction) that they drew on as appropriate;

- differentiated the curriculum to match activities and level of challenge to the children's needs;
- showed an equal balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated activities; and
- had clear behaviour and discipline policies, supported by facilitating children to talk through conflicts, which benefited social skills.

According to Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, an interactive role is required of the teachers/practitioners. From their extensive analyses of adult/child pedagogical interactions in the pre-school settings, they highlight the importance of 'sustained shared thinking', where adults and children work together 'to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend a narrative' (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, p.718; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). In addition, they point out how important it is for teachers and practitioners to extend activities that are initiated by children. Nevertheless, they were also careful to explain that, in the best pre-school settings, there was a balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated activities, with the children spending about half of their time in freely chosen play activities. The best practitioners used a mixture of approaches — scaffolding, extending, discussing, monitoring, and direct instruction — to fit both the concept or skill and the developmental zone of the children.

These findings represent a distinct shift from a 'responding and facilitating' model that was promoted in earlier developmentally appropriate approaches, toward a more 'proactive and intentional pedagogy' (Wood, 2007b) that is endorsed by the recent DAP framework (NAEYC, 2009).

In summary, the concept of developmentally appropriate practice in early years education has undergone substantial revision in the past ten years. This revision has been informed by shifting theoretical perspectives, new research about children's learning and — importantly — by how DAP principles and guidelines have been translated into early years classrooms, tested and evaluated. In this regard, teachers' beliefs about early years education, their prior knowledge about children's development in various domains, as well as demands for standards and accountability have influenced their classroom practice. Because of variability in how DAP has been implemented, it is perhaps not surprising that the outcomes for children's learning have been mixed. The emphasis is now on recommending that teachers find a balance between child-initiated and teacher-led learning, in order to ensure that children acquire appropriate content knowledge, are cognitively challenged and supported, while still deriving the social and motivational benefits that are associated with developmentally appropriate practice. In the next section, we look at how this balance can be negotiated in the area of children's play.

4. Learning and teaching through play

Recognition of the importance of play in the education of young children has a long history. Play has featured prominently in the thinking of eminent early years philosophers and educators, from Rousseau through Dewey, Montessori, Froebel and McMillan to Steiner. Nevertheless, in the last 10-15 years, new thinking has emerged about the role of play in early years education, prompted by shifts in theoretical perspectives, close observations and video recordings of play in nurseries and early primary school classrooms, as well as by insights from longitudinal research that has linked distinctive features of early years pedagogy with long-term positive outcomes for children (see above).

4.1 Rethinking play as pedagogy

In 2010, two volumes will appear on themes of ‘reconceptualising’ and ‘re-thinking’ play, edited by prominent early years researchers (Wood, Broadhead & Howard, 2010) and Yelland (2010). In her contribution to one of these volumes, Stephen (2010b) points out that the purpose of reviewing the contribution of play is not to imply a rejection of play but rather

“to strengthen its place as a medium for learning when that is most appropriate, to ensure that the play opportunities offered to children are playful and engaging to them and to develop a more nuanced and evidence-based rationale for play in the learning environment that is clear about the benefits and can go beyond an appeal to consensus and historic claims to distinctiveness.” (Stephen, 2010b, p. 4)

Traditionally, free play — that is, play activities that are initiated and freely chosen by the child, and sustained without adult interference — was privileged as the purest form of play and was thus most highly valued by early years practitioners. Bruce (1991), for example, suggests that the word ‘play’ is too broad to be useful and that only ‘free-flow’ play captures its essence. In her view, play is a unique form of activity in that it cannot be forced — you cannot make children play. Nevertheless, concerns have been expressed over the years about the *quality* of children’s play in early years settings — that it is often used as a time-filler, with little adult involvement and with low expectations about purposes and outcomes. In their observations of children in nurseries, Meadows and Cashdan (1988) reported that, while the children were busy and contented, sustained conversation or play with adults, high complexity play activities, and purposeful play leading to exciting discovery, were rare. Sylva (1984), in what she called a ‘hard-headed look at the fruits of play’ attempted to examine what play activities most stimulated children’s imaginations and encouraged their problem-solving and exploration rather than just filling time. Sylva’s observations of settings in both UK and US nurseries showed that some play activities stretched children more than others, particularly art, puzzles and games and constructional materials. In contrast, some traditionally favourite activities such as dough, sand and dressing-up seemed to be less engaging for the children. More important than the materials, she argued, was the ‘play partner’ — other children or adults. She particularly emphasised the importance of ‘a sensitive adult’ to help enrich children’s play and also to help children talk and reflect on it.

As well as a renewed appreciation of the role of adults in children’s play, there is also a new recognition about the social and cultural situated nature of play. Play is not entirely a neutral social space where children ‘naturally’ develop. Children are social agents in their own right and social interactions between children during play can recreate and replicate gendered stereotypes, existing dominance hierarchies, and can include or exclude children. In addition, Brooker (2002), in a study comparing parents and children from Anglo and Bangladeshi cultural backgrounds in the UK, has shown that free choice and play-based approaches do not benefit all children especially where these are not consistent with cultural norms about child-rearing practices in homes and communities.

4.2 The role of adults in children’s play

The shift in thinking about the role of adults in children’s play has led to a more detailed examination of practitioners’/teachers’ *beliefs* about the role of play in children’s learning as well as an analysis of their *interactions* with children during play activities, using structured observations or video recordings. The findings from these research studies are increasingly important, especially as play-based pedagogies become the common approach across the UK for the first years of primary school.

The classic research by Wood and Bennett (Bennett, Wood & Rogers, 1997; Wood & Bennett, 1997) studied nine teachers in reception classrooms for 4-5 year olds in England, before the introduction of the new English Foundation Stage. Teachers' beliefs about the role of play were examined through interviews and discussions, and children's play activities in the classroom were videoed. The videos were then used to prompt the teachers' reflections on whether their intentions and plans were realised in their classroom practices. There was good agreement among the teachers about the purposes of play and its relationship to learning. The defining qualities of play, according to the teachers, were intrinsic motivation and child-initiation. The teachers' theories of play were translated into practice through planning and organisation, the environment and their intentions for learning. Overall, planning was characterised by broad developmental aims rather than what the children would learn through the specific play activities. Their more specific intentions were mainly around language development and socialisation. When the teachers viewed the videos, they noted many examples where there was a mismatch between their theories about play and their practices. For example, often the reception-age children lacked the social, physical and cognitive skills to engage successfully in play, to follow through their plans, negotiate, play co-operatively or resolve conflict. When an adult was not available or did not intervene, the play sometimes broke down, leaving the children frustrated and demotivated. Also, the ways the teachers conceptualised their role in a theoretical way was not always consistent with how they managed the classroom. Often the play activities were more teacher-led than child-initiated, even for activities which the teachers felt strongly should remain the child's world (e.g., role play). Wood and Bennett concluded that there were gaps between the rhetoric and reality of play, particularly in primary classrooms where the constraints on the timetable, low ratio of adults to children, and the limitations on space added to the difficulties which the teachers had in figuring out an appropriate role in the children's play. During the evaluation of the Enriched Curriculum, interviews with teachers has also shown that they have a better understanding of their role in more structured, teacher-led activities and that some teachers struggled to cope with their role during structured play (Sproule et al. 2005).

Others studies have drawn attention to the limitations of free-play in Scottish pre-schools for 4-5 year olds in the context of children interacting freely with ICT. Plowman and Stephen (2005) noted that children's freedom to choose when to play with the computer led to very varied patterns of engagement, from very high levels (e.g., sustained interaction for 15 minutes) to children trying different games at random or just wandering off or becoming frustrated after unsuccessful attempts to complete a task or a game. Using an explicit socio-cultural framework, Plowman and Stephen (2007) created a pedagogical framework called 'guided interaction' to describe how children's interactions with computers and other forms of ICT can be more actively supported in pre-school settings (and by implication in early primary school settings following play-based pedagogies). Guided interaction consists of a proximal mode where the adult and child (or group of children) are directly interacting with the computer (or other device) and consists of such pedagogical moves as demonstrating, explaining, instructing, modelling, prompting, enjoying, providing feedback, etc. The framework also consists of distal pedagogical actions that are one step removed from direction interactions, such as arranging access to the ICT, modelling, planning a range of activities, providing resources and identifying the next steps. Although only proximal interactions would normally be termed as 'scaffolding', Plowman and Stephen point out that the intention for guided interaction at the proximal level is reflected in the planning at the distal level. For example, they noted that practitioners who did not plan for sustained interactions were more likely to

respond reactively to events (helping children with turn-taking or managing the time spent on the computer) rather than engaging in joint problem-solving.

Research on adult-child interactions in early years settings is beginning to make more explicit the range of pedagogical possibilities used by high quality early years teachers and practitioners. For example, drawing on the results of the Competent Child longitudinal study in New Zealand (Wylie, Thompson & Lythe, 1999) that identified the quality factors in early years settings that predicted children's competence at 8 years of age, Dunkin and Hanna (2001) created a teaching resource, called *Thinking Together*. *Thinking Together* elaborates a range of high quality adult-child interactions that can occur in playful settings. The main point is that high-quality interactions are motivated by the 'genuine interest' of the adult in what the child is doing and are characterised by the adult listening and extending the child's thinking and knowledge. The latter is achieved by using open-ended question or comments, giving the child the time to respond, by being responsive to conversations initiated by the child, and using knowledge of the child to extend the interaction. These characteristics are reminiscent of 'sustained shared thinking' identified in the REPEY research in the UK (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, see earlier section) where adults and children work together 'to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend a narrative' (p. 718). Dunkin and Hanna's resource goes on to illustrate a range of roles that adults can adopt and that can shape the interaction and set the tone. They identify the following roles:

- *The facilitator* — when the adult helps children to sustain their play by providing strategies and ideas, extends their thinking, gives children time to think and to speak, supports recall and creates opportunities for children to make the next steps;
- *The co-learner/co-explorer* — in this role the adult models the role he or she would wish to see the child taking, thus enabling the child to make their own discoveries and develop problem-solving skills. The role to be modelled might include looking for resources or information, asking a more knowledgeable person for help and struggling with a problem. An important part of this role is modelling language.
- *The play partner* — this entails the adult just being involved in the child's activity, joining in, enjoying it and following the actions developed by the child.
- *The listener/decoder* — in this role the adult listens very carefully, gives full attention to a child and gives the child time to fully explain or to show what they have been doing. But it can also mean acting as a sounding board for the child's ideas, reflecting their thinking back to them and sometimes para-phrasing the child's utterances to check if they have been accurately understood by the adult.
- *The planner* — adults can plan to interact with particular children and to build up an interest or strength they have shown, or as part of their observation and assessment.

There are overlaps between these roles and other frameworks that have been referred to in earlier sections of this review. For example, the 'facilitator' role is probably most similar to the concept of scaffolding and the 'planner' role is an example of distal guided interaction in the Plowman and Stephen framework.

4.3 Peer interactions and children's play

Despite the previous emphasis on the role of adults in children's play, an equally important strand of research points to the importance of child-child interactions during play, particularly for promoting social and co-operative learning. In a suitably supportive environment, young children can skillfully scaffold and support one another.

For many years, Broadhead (1997, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2009) has observed 3-4 year olds, 4-5 year olds, and 5-6 years playing both in nursery settings and in reception classes (following the English Foundation Stage curriculum). The focus for her observations was on children playing with peers, not on adult-child interactions; children were observed during sand play, water play, role play, large-construction and small-construction play. At least two children needed to be involved in the play and observations lasted as long as the play lasted. An interpretative framework, called the Social Play Continuum, was constructed that charts the *children's actions/interactions and associated language* through four increasingly sophisticated levels of development called Associative Play, Social Play, Highly Social Play, and Co-operative Play. An important finding from her observations is the role of self-talk at the different stages. At the Associative Stage, when play is characterised largely by children playing alongside one another, there is very little self-talk. At the higher levels in the continuum, Social and Highly Social Play, self-talk or thinking aloud acts like a commentary on the child's own actions (is self-regulation) but is also an invitation to interact by directing the attention of the child playing alongside. These comments are then acknowledged and lead to exchanges and discourse at the Highly Social Play stage. However, talk tends to disappear again at the Co-operative Play Stage when the children are highly absorbed and play with high levels of concentration and reciprocity. Broadhead (2001, p. 30) points to other features of the continuum; (1) as play progresses, children seek out adult intervention less and less; (2) at the level of Social Play, children's interactions tend to be relatively brief, as their play is punctuated with periods of associative play; (3) co-operative play is characterised by deep intellectual commitment and high levels of reciprocity; and (4) children's play becomes more interactive, more challenging and potentially more satisfying when opportunities to build sequences of reciprocal actions are provided.

An important finding from Broadhead's (2009) study was that age is not always the key factor in determining whether the children play at the Co-operative Play Stage, with its higher levels of cognitive challenge. For example, some of the younger children in the nursery settings played at higher levels of sophistication than those in the reception classes, which she attributed to the dominant pedagogies that prevailed at that time in the different settings. Play-based approaches were more prevalent in the nurseries whereas the reception classes tended to be more teacher directed. She concluded that the nursery children were more familiar with the play materials and their play potential and that regular and sustained access to play materials was necessary where play themes could be developed and deepened over time. Her research shows how the prevailing culture in a classroom can both support and hinder progression in play, to the extent that some children may even regress. When play does progress, playful activity can be cognitive challenging, involving complex uses of language, as well as promoting sociability and co-operation.

Although the influence of Vygotsky is most often associated with the concept of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development (see earlier section), his work has also led to a deeper understanding of the purpose of role play for children's learning. According to Vygotsky (1938/1967), socio-dramatic play (the term Vygotsky used) has three components: children create an imaginary situation; they take on and act out roles and they follow a set of rules determined by those roles (the children play out some kind of internal 'script' associated with the role). Role play of

this kind (variously called socio-dramatic play, make-believe play, and pretend play) is considered important because it contributes to the development of children's self-regulation. For example, as children act out their respective roles, they monitor their play partners 'playing by the rules' and, at the same time, respond to directions and expectations of the other players. In addition, children must inhibit behaviours and desires that are not associated with the role. This degree of self/other regulation demonstrates complex social understanding. Several writers in the Vygotskian tradition refer to the idea of 'mature' play (Elkonin, 2005; Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Bodrova, 2008), and have outlined some of its characteristics:

First, mature play is characterised by the child's use of object-substitutes that may bear very little if any resemblance to the objects they symbolise.....The second characteristic of mature play is the child's ability to take on and sustain a specific role by consistently engaging in actions, speech and interactions that fit that particular character. The more mature the play, the richer are the roles and relationships between them. Another sign of mature play is the child's ability to follow the rules associated with the pretend scenario in general.....and with a chosen character in particular..... Yet another characteristic of mature play is high quality play scenarios that often integrate many themes and span the time of several days or even weeks. (Bodrova, 2008, p 364)

Bodrova goes on to comment that many 5 and 6 year olds continue to display signs of immature play that are more typical of toddlers and pre-schoolers, for example, playing only with realistic props, creating play scenarios that are primitive or stereotypical, with limited themes and roles. In a recent ethnographic study of 4-5 year olds' role play in English reception classes, Rogers and Evan (2007) concluded that role play was severely affected by the lack of indoor space and interruptions which limited the opportunities for sustained and more complex narratives and scenarios to develop (boys were particularly disadvantaged from space limitations). In addition, role play areas indoors were often over prescribed by the teachers who sometimes assigned roles, or restricted choice in a variety of ways. In contrast, outdoor play seemed to free up both the teachers and the children from the confinement of the indoor classroom. Outdoors, girls engaged in more active and challenging play, and boys appeared less disruptive with fewer instances of conflict with adults.

In order to address some of these difficulties, Bodrova and Leong (2001) have developed the *Tools of the Mind* programme with the specific purpose of scaffolding 'mature' play. They point out that in most early years classrooms, children are of similar age and thus do not have the opportunity to learn from older children, who might be considered as 'play experts'. In the Tools of the Mind programme, teachers are specifically encouraged to help children use toys and props in a symbolic way (e.g., rather than using a toy telephone, represent the telephone with an object such as a rectangular block, which bears only the most superficial resemblance to it). Gesture is also encouraged to stand for action. Activities are designed to develop extended play scenarios, to discuss roles and to plan future scenarios, called 'play plans'. As well as contributing to the quality of their role play, these activities also extend children's language and writing abilities. Although the activities in the Tools of the Mind programme involve teachers to a greater extent than is generally expected for role play, Bodrova points out that their involvement should last only for a short time; the children should quickly learn how to build their own roles and rules, and need much less support. Comparing the Tools of the Mind programme with a more traditional early years curriculum, Barnett et al. (2008) found that it did improve the quality of classroom interactions and children's self-regulation (fewer instances of behaviour problem behaviours were reported by the teachers). The programme also had some positive effects on the children's language (though these effects did not reach statistical significance).

In summary, close observations of children playing together confirms that children can engage in sophisticated and complex interactions during play. Nevertheless, environmental factors — such as space, interruptions, play potential of materials — as well as limitations in children’s general experiences of social roles/social behaviour, and their previous play experiences, can prevent them from progressing to more complex and mature forms of play, characterised by the Co-operative Play stage in Broadhead’s continuum, and Bodrova’s idea of mature socio-dramatic play.

5. Educational transitions²

The explosion in pre-school education internationally in recent years has focussed research attention on the early years in children’s lives (OECD, 2001, 2006). These changes have “generated increased awareness of the importance of providing continuity and coherence in children’s early development and learning” (Neuman, 2002). Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (1999, p. 47) go so far as to say that the transition into school “sets the tone and direction of a child’s school career.” Brooker (2008) notes the rapid change of pace in today’s society and the need for children “to acquire flexibility and resilience” that they will need in order to adapt easily to change. Developmentally appropriate practice in itself, with its emphasis on the moment to moment needs of the individual, naturally tends to have an impact in how practitioners think about transitions.

With many more children attending pre-school, both nationally and internationally, an additional major transition is introduced into their young lives at a vulnerable age. Furthermore, if the primary school operates a play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum in the early school years, yet another transition takes place into the somewhat more formal atmosphere that pertains after one or two years in primary school.

Research has identified some important questions about transitions:

1. What child characteristics contribute to or detract from a successful transition?
2. What is the role of parents, peers, family and community?
3. What is the role of the practitioner and the school?

Together, these questions about transition have been interpreted within the context of the Dynamic Effects Model (Walsh et al., 2008). This model, described initially by Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta (2000) allows for constant interplay, not only between the child and teacher but between child, teacher, peers and parents. From the point of view of the teacher, it provides pointers to which children are more likely to find the transition difficult and offers a motivation for getting parents and other stakeholders involved and even bringing them into the classroom.

² Some researchers discuss *horizontal* transitions within the classroom (Neuman, 2002), that is to say, transitions from one activity to another. We are not concerned with this type of transition here but rather with the *vertical* transitions involving a major change of context and mode of learning such as moving to a new class or a change of teacher.

5.1 Child characteristics and successful transition

Margetts (2003) identified gender, age in class and order of birth as being significant, with boys and children young for their year group finding it more difficult to make the transition to a more formal setting. She also found that children from high deprivation areas and children with English as an additional language were more likely to experience difficulty, often mediated by language deficits in the case of the former. Emotional well-being and social competence have been identified as influential by several researchers (e.g. Dockett & Perry, 2001; Margetts, 2003). Learning dispositions, particularly the ability to concentrate and persevere, are also of great consequence (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Katz, 1999). Children with multiple sources of disadvantage in these areas are likely to be more at risk.

5.2 Parent, family and community characteristics

The mother or principal carer will have the greatest influence on how the child settles through maternal sensitivity in interaction with the child, communication with the school and degree of wider involvement with the school (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). Mothers principally, but also other family members, have a key role in setting the home culture. If this culture is aligned more closely with that of school, in terms of adult/child interactions, routines, language and expectations, children can bridge the gap more easily. Teachers clearly have an important contribution to make in welcoming parents and encouraging them to take as much part as possible in the life and work of the school. Stephen and Cope (2003) have argued that middle-class parents find it easier to achieve this alignment and they also tend to be more pro-active towards the school. The child's peers, in and out of school, also have a role in setting the cultural context and also help to determine "the children's sense of belonging and acceptance within a school community" (Dockett and Perry, 2001). Children who can make friends and co-operate will find it much easier to integrate (Ladd, 2003). Those children whose peers settle down quickly are also more likely to settle themselves. When a whole class is likely to find it difficult because of community and family characteristics, there may be a need to make transitions even more smooth and gradual. Kagan and Neuman (1998) draw attention to the need to "respect children's home culture and values" as they come from home into pre-school or school. Brooker (2008) also draws attention to the special needs of those children for whom English is an additional language. We might also add the special case of children who speak English but come to pre-school or school with very poor language skills.

5.3 The role of the teacher and the school

Besides those activities already mentioned, the teacher and the school can actively prepare children for moving on to a new situation (Broström, 2003, 2007), plan transitional activities (Dunlop & Fabian, 2005; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007), develop buddy programmes (Dockett & Perry, 2001) and establish strong communication between teachers of successive classes (or between pre-school and school, Margetts, 1999). Research shows that preparation for the move from Foundation Stage into Key Stage 1 has not been as widespread (Parsons & Stephenson, 2002). In children having major difficulties, Brostrom (2003) suggests that the practitioner/teacher who is well known to the child can act as a useful mediator at times. There is increasing realisation also that if practitioners and/or teachers want to know the effect of transitions on children, one useful route is to ask the children themselves (Einarsdóttir, 2007). This has been part of local research into transitions (Walsh et al., 2008). This kind of research has revealed that children have both positive and negative feelings about transitions. Positive ideas include having "real big toys up there", learning "lots of new things" and even looking forward to added restrictions such as not talking in class and having to line up in an orderly way. It is clear that children see the move as a right of passage as well as having some misgivings.

The use of DAP within a school should suggest that curricular planning will allow flexibility and transitional activities and routines whenever these are needed, as these are inherent to the concept (See section on DAP). In the Enriched Curriculum Evaluation Project, researchers found good practice in this respect, with teachers themselves identifying the need for a gradual transition to Key Stage 1 (Sproule et al., 2006).

5.4 Progression and transitions

The fact that young children look forward to major changes is a reminder that change, in the form of progression, needs to be a constant feature of children's education in order to prepare them for all the challenges ahead. There was some evidence from the Enriched Curriculum research (McGuinness et al., 2009b) that teachers with a predominantly maturationist view of DAP found it difficult to provide sufficient challenge for the children because their focus was on developmental readiness rather than on leading the children beyond their current level of competence. The new NAEYC guidelines remind us of the dynamic interaction between maturation and learning, "Development and learning result from a dynamic and continuous interaction of biological maturation and experience" (NAEYC, 2009, p10 and p12). Dunlop (2003) has also stressed that if "learning how to learn" is fundamental to the educator's approach, then children can become an agent for change in themselves.

In summary, dealing with transitions successfully demands planning, goodwill from all the stakeholders and a willingness on all sides to adapt. Researchers agree that "transition activities" designed to orient children to their new environment — such as school visits — should not be one-off, tokenistic exercises, but should be meaningful, repeated and sustained. Children's peer relationships are very important in mediating the transition process, so staff should try to harness these, for example, by pairing children off once they enter primary school, and encouraging communication with pupils in older age grades. Establishing *continuity* in classroom activities is as important as helping children directly address transition: mediating practices should be designed which bridge the gap between those found in the old classroom and those found in the new one.

6. Conclusion: Towards a more integrated pedagogy in the early years

The literature review shows that the concept of DAP, and the meaning of a play-based pedagogy, are under constant review, informed both by new theoretical insights (e.g., from socio-cultural theory), from empirical research, and from practitioners' experiences as they seek to implement these practices on a larger scale.

The widening access to pre-school provision in the UK, and the emergence (or re-emergence) of play-based approaches as the recommended pedagogies for early years *primary* classrooms, means that these concepts and associated classroom practices will assume even greater importance in future years. As the last 10 years of research and practice has shown, there is a need to be open-minded, to deepen our understanding and to adopt an evidence-based approach.

Several strands of research point to the need for a more *integrated early years pedagogy* that honours the interests and autonomy of young children, while at the same time accommodates new thinking about the role of adults in scaffolding and co-constructing children's learning. For example, from the REPEY study with 3-4 year olds in

preschool in England, Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) confirmed that the best practitioners (as defined by the educational outcomes for the children on school entry) used a mixture of pedagogical approaches — scaffolding, extending, discussing, monitoring, as well as direct instruction. They were also careful to point out that the children spent about half their time in freely chosen play activities. In a Scottish study with 4-5 year old pre-schoolers, Plowman and Stephen (2007) noted that children’s freedom to choose when to play with the computer led to varied patterns of engagement, and they recommended more direct engagement for the teacher in their guided interaction model. Dunkin and Hanna’s (2001) research in New Zealand outlined the varied roles that an adult can adopt yet maintain a playful orientation and set a playful tone. The evaluation of the Enriched Curriculum also showed how teachers’ beliefs about readiness to learn and about what was appropriate in a play-based curriculum restricted the range of pedagogical strategies which they used (McGuinness et al., 2009b).

On the other hand, research also showed that the learning environment — including adults — can restrict play. For example, the Rogers and Evans (2007) study of 4-5 year olds in reception classes showed that indoor space, interruptions, and teachers’ over-prescription of roles, restricted opportunities for sustained role play. Also, Broadhead’s work points out the progressive complexity in children’s peer interactions during play that need to be understood and nurtured; she noted that the play potential of materials and children’s previous experience with play materials can influence how sophisticated their play becomes. In addition, following Vygotskian traditions, Bodrova (2001, 2008) privileges socio-dramatic play, especially in its more mature forms. She argued for the need to scaffold role play through using play plans and other activities. In general, the research literature suggests that there is a gap between the rhetoric and the reality of play — to use Wood and Bennett’s (1997) phrase.

In an effort to provide a more integrated pedagogical approach, Wood (2007b) has created a framework (Figure 1) that distinguishes between two dimensions: (1) the nature of the adult-child interaction, whether it is predominantly teacher-initiated or child-initiated; and (2) whether the activity could be described as work or pure play. In her model, work is defined as having pre-defined learning outcomes and lacking choice for the children — being curriculum-led. In this framework, the bottom right-hand quadrant probably includes free-play activities chosen by the children, with teachers following the children’s interests — the traditional understanding of play.

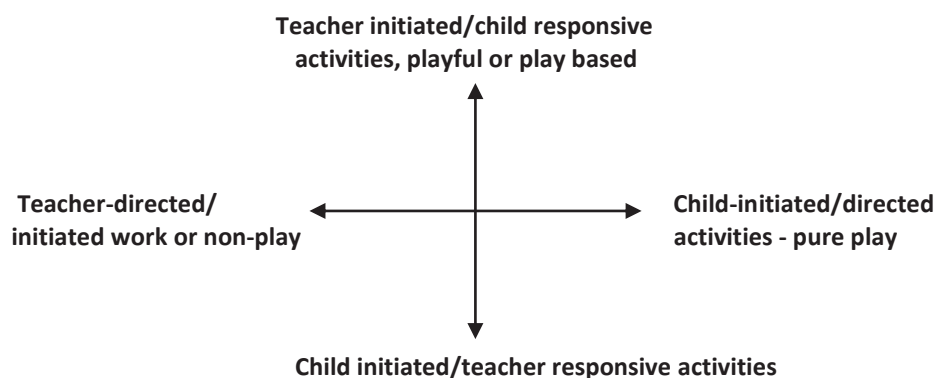


Figure 1 Integrated curriculum and pedagogical approaches (Wood, 2007b, p. 318)

In the top left-hand quadrant, activities are likely to be curriculum-led and teacher-initiated, resembling direct instruction or worksheets. However, the two adjacent quadrants invite more mixed conceptions and activities. For example, the top right-hand quadrant considers the possibility of teacher initiated play-like activities (such as using

number stories and rhymes or exploring characters in favourite stories). The bottom left-hand quadrant considers child-initiated activities related more directly to curriculum goals and learning intentions, such as pursuing their interests in specific areas of learning (for example, children choosing to go to the writing table).

The EYECEP research team have proposed an alternative approach which is consistent with Wood's integrated framework, yet seeks to capture the essence of the theory/framework in a metaphor that is meaningful to practitioners, easily conceptualised and developmentally appropriate for teachers given their knowledge base. Growing out of the EYECEP research project, based on structured classroom observations in Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms, videos of good practice, and taking into consideration the longitudinal outcomes for children's learning, the research team has identified an overarching principle, called *Playful Structure*. Playful Structure is intended as a means of breaking down the dichotomies between formal and informal learning and between work and play. The idea of Playful Structure invites teachers to initiate and maintain a degree of playfulness into the child's entire learning experience, while at the same time maintaining adequate structure to ensure that effective learning takes place. Thus, the idea of play becomes a characteristic of the *interaction* between the adult and the child and not just a distinction associated with child-initiated vs adult-initiated activities. By this we mean that the interaction assumes playful characteristics; for example, the tone is lighthearted, the activity becomes self-sustaining because both partners are enjoying it, and unexpected turns and directions are allowed. Blending these two concepts — playfulness and structure — and elaborating on what they mean in early years primary classrooms form the basis for the guidance which accompanies this literature review.

The current move across the UK to a more play-based and developmentally appropriate pedagogy in the early years constitutes a major transformation of early years practice across the first years of compulsory schooling. It would be unrealistic to assume these changes will be confined to the first one or two years of primary school. The lessons learned from implementing the Enriched Curriculum in Northern Ireland (Walsh et al., 2010) points to more general consequences and knock-on effects for pedagogy and curriculum design as children progress through their primary school years. Existing teacher education, as well as in-service professional development, will need to fully embrace these changes. There may also be a need for coordinated training and professional development for all early years practitioners — pre-school and primary school — if the experiences of young children are to be truly aligned and their continuities and discontinuities well understood.

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