**The Changing Face of Play**

**An exploration of the Importance of Outdoor Play in the Digital Age**

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**Introduction**

This research paper presents the grounded theory emerging from a small scale appreciative study into the importance of outdoor play in the Early Years Foundation Stage, (EYFS). This study was conducted across seven different settings serving diverse demographics, drawing on the experience and expertise of participating practitioners.

The impetus for this study was the realisation that the decline in school readiness observed by the participants was not isolated to their particular contexts but indicative of national and international trends, (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012, NAHT & Family and Childcare Trust, 2017). Increasingly, this decline has been linked to the rising dominance of digital technology as a primary play experience in the early years, (Fromberg and Bergen, 2015, Gentile, Swing, Lim and Khoo, 2012).

The constant comparison between the observations and assertions, instinctive and informed practice of the participants, theories of learning, and contemporary research into brain development is summarised in this paper.

The emerging theory suggests that outdoor play has distinctive benefits in the development of the characteristics of effective behaviour for learning, (DfE, 2017, Early Education, 2012) and as a result, has become increasingly important in early years settings in the digital age.

It is hoped that this study will assist practitioners in making or defending changes to their provision, and also that it will inform initial teacher training students about the theory and research underpinning their future practice.

**Methodology**

All Early Years practitioners could be said to be researchers, constantly adapting their provision and refining their pedagogical practice to respond to the needs of each unique child (Grigg, 2014). Pollard, (2014) explains that this process is the basis for the development of reflective practice. This occurs when the experience of an individual or group of teachers is synthesised with evidence gained through the insights of other practitioners and researchers.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison, (2011), explicate that behaviour can only be understood by the researcher sharing the same frame of reference as the participants as it requires a understanding of the context in which the behaviour takes place. From its inception this study has been emergent and responsive to the observations and assertions of the participants about the behaviour observed in their settings throughout their careers and the perceived decline in school readiness.

A Glasserian grounded theory approach, (Glasser, 1998), was adopted for this study. Synthesis of the experiences of the participants with existing theory and emerging neurological research has resulted in the emergence of grounded theory, which can be used to support and defend the pedagogical principals promoting outdoor play as essential for learning and development in the Early Years.

**The importance of outdoor play**

All children in the EYFS have a protected right to outdoor play areas and activities on a daily basis (DfE, 2017:30). The outdoor teaching and learning environment is seen as of equal importance to the indoor environment and involves careful planning and assessment. In accordance with a wealth of developmental theory, there should be no division between work and play in either environment; children should have a degree of control over the environment and resources within it, being able to adapt or modify them to suit their needs and interests. This definition is consistent with that used by Frobel, (Tovey, 2017), Montessori, (1996) and Isaacs, (1971).

The framework for the EYFS states: ’Play is essential for children’s development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems, and relate to others.’ ‘(DfE, 2017:9). The origins of the concept that children learn best through play can be traced back to the German pioneer Frobel (1782-1852) but the 2010 Tickell review revealed that while Frobel’s concept of learning through play is widely accepted, there is often confusion about what play actually means (Tickell, 2011). Bruner describes play as an approach rather than an activity (Olsen, 2014) but Stewart, (2011) demonstrates that it can be seen to describe activities which are self-selected and self-directed, highly engaging, intrinsically motivating, open ended and spontaneous and which include elements of exploration and creativity. These elements were discussed by each of the participants in this study, indicating that, amongst Early Years practitioners at least, there is consensus about what defines an activity as play.

Playing and exploring is defined in the non-statutory guidance for the EYFS (Early Education, 2012) as the key method of engaging children in learning. This concurs with Isaacs’s assertion that ‘animals which are able to play more are also able to learn more’ (Isaacs, 1971:9). Evidence of the power of play is provided by Gray, (2015), who cites studies conducted using mammals rather than children, where the subjects have been deliberately deprived of play. Once introduced to new situations these mammals were reluctant to explore or actively engage with the environment. When a second subject was introduced, the play deprived mammals either froze and chose not to interact or lashed out aggressively, unable to respond to the social signals of their new potential playmate. It would not be ethically possible to replicate this study using children, but the results of the study appear to reflect the behaviour witnessed by participating practitioners, particularly at the beginning of the academic year when children enter the setting who have not had prior access to rich experiences of outdoor play.

Participating practitioners observed that the social dynamic is often quite different in outdoor areas. They reported that children seem calmer, are less competitive, more supportive of each other and more likely to encourage each other to persevere or challenge themselves further. Research conducted by Broadhead et al, (2013), Nedovic and Morrissey, (2013), Play England, (2009) and DfES, (2006) as well as less academically recognised research by Bilton (2011) and Knight, (2011), supports these assertions, suggesting that outdoor play provides a particularly authentic environment for risk taking and challenge. Indeed, Broadhead et al, (2013) propose that the greater the level of challenge is within that environment, the greater the potential for learning becomes. These studies also indicate that this ability to assess and take physical risks is transferable to the emotional risk taking ability necessary to embrace academic and philosophical challenge.

Participating practitioners also reported that they were better able to assess children’s levels of understanding through outdoor play rather than in formal, or adult directed activities. This assessment of the abilities, understanding, needs and interests of children enables practitioners to plan future provision. Despite the wealth of opportunities for learning and development offered through outdoor play, Shackell, Butler, Doyle and Ball (2008) identified that there has been a decline in the number of children playing outdoors over the last three decades. Instead, young children frequently use ‘digital interactive technologies’ as one of their ‘dominant play experiences’ (Fromberg and Bergen, 2015: 217).

**The changing face of play**

Over the last ten years digital technology has advanced at an unprecedented rate. Today’s children are growing up surrounded by computers, iPads, smart phones, video games and all manner of electronic devices. These devices have become so much a part of our everyday lives that it is hard to believe that smart phones were only developed in 1995. Even harder to comprehend is that iPhones, which have revolutionised the way we use technology, have only been available since 2007 and iPads only since 2010.

As adults we have adapted quickly to this exponential increase in the accessibility of information communication technology, but it seems that our settings are now populated by ’digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001:1). The internet is changing the way we think, the way we learn and the way we live (Palmer 2015).

**Exposing the connection between digital dominance and behavioural disturbance**

Participating practitioners expressed concern that many time pressured parents used digital devices as a substitute for outdoor play. Technology based play has provided a useful option for risk averse parents and led to children staying inside more and being more closely supervised (Bundy et al, 2009). Billington, (2016), cites statistics from Childwise, (2015), which show that the number of under-fives using computers or digital devices has increased by 170% between 2012 and 2015.

Parents can be assured that there are distinct educational advantages that can be gained through the use of digital devices. These include positive impact on nonverbal reasoning, increase in long-term memory and the provision of an engaging route into reading for reluctant readers (Aubrey and Dahl, 2008). It could also be argued that, at the developmentally appropriate stage, digital tools allow children to develop automaticity in basic academic skills such as letter recognition, (Hattie and Yates, 2014). However, the residual impact on learning over time remains greater if children are physically engaged in play based tasks (Thomas et al, 2008, cited by Broadhead, Howard and Wood, 2013).

A second, equally disturbing consequence of the rise of digital dominance and contributory factor in the changing face of childhood is explored by Greenfield (2015), who observes that our consumer led society has resulted in parents working longer and longer hours in an attempt to keep pace with technological innovation in order to ensure that their children have access to the latest devices. This increase in working hours has resulted in a reduction in the amount of time parents spend interacting, playing and bonding with their children, (Greenfield, 2015). It has been suggested that this reduction in parental bonding means that children are struggling to develop the emotional intelligence necessary to form friendships and connect with others (Louv, 2009). Furthermore, it has been proposed that this disconnect is a major factor in the increase of violent behaviour in preschool children desperate for touch and sensory stimulation because, as children spend more and more time indoors online, they are missing out on the lessons learned only through experience and engaging with real life learning outside, alongside others (Louv, 2009, Christakis, 2016, Palmer, 2015).

Abram, (1997), proposes that as humans we have become disconnected from nature and this unnatural state of existence has resulted in the rise of psychological conditions such as anxiety and depression. Louv, (2009), goes further making the bold claim that, rather than attention deficit disorder, today’s children are suffering from ‘nature deficit disorder’ (Louv, 2009: 36). It is Louv’s belief that the ‘postmodern acceleration of indirect experience’ (2009:65) where children are increasingly developing their understanding of the world through interaction with second hand sources such as televisions and computer games, has contributed to children failing to develop a sense of emotional stability, resilience, connectedness or empathy.

Some fifty years after, Montessori described ‘the poverty of affluence’ (1996:144), it seems that, in the developed world children have fallen victim to the ‘paradox of plenty’ (Christakis, 2016:172). They are surrounded by toys and digital devices but are losing the ability to play and are struggling to develop the basic social skills needed to engage with learning and with other learners in Early Years settings. As Palmer laments, ‘In a global culture whose citizens are wealthier, healthier and more privileged than ever before in human history, children grow unhappier every year’ (Palmer, 2015:1).

**The increasing importance of outdoor play in the digital age**

The increasing dominance of digital play has led to practitioners reasserting children’s protected rights to free outdoor play, (DfE, 2017), by reclaiming outdoor areas in new and exciting ways (Tovey, 2017). The growing interest in increasing and enriching outdoor provision is echoed in ITT where students have observed its impact during their school experiences.

Participating practitioners reported higher levels of social cohesion during outdoor activities. They also reported an impact on communication and language development and self-expression. Greenfield, (2015), suggests that this ability to articulate thinking leads to calmer, more logical process rather than single minded focus on goals promoted through playing computer games. Neurological evidence suggests that the development of social relationships is essential for learning as it leads to the co-construction of knowledge (Greenfield, 2015, Waite, 2011). Participating practitioners gave several examples of children actively engaging in meaningful problem solving situations where high levels of independence and critical thinking were demonstrated. The nature of outdoor play means that children are more likely to act independently and instigate activities when playing outside, (Bruce, 2010). While some risk adverse children may need their outdoor play to be scaffolded, skilled practitioners allow children the time and freedom to pursue their interests and explore potential solutions to self-identified problems through trial and error, (Bruce, 2010 and Knight, 2011, Palaiologu, 2013, Christakis, 2016).

Perry, (2008, cited by Nedovic and Morrissey, 2013), purports that outdoors, children begin to make sense of the world and form relationships with others which help them to do so. It appears that not only do activities which require collaboration provide greater cognitive challenge, (Light and Butterworth, 1992, cited by Nedovic and Morrissey, 2013), but this collaboration is key to developing the ability to resolve conflict, (Doise and Mugny, cited by Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2000). Fisher, (2016), is emphatic that the emotional environment of the child is key to learning, a view consistent with that of Rankin, (cited in Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998) who insists that conflict resolution is reliant on emotional intelligence rather than intellect.

The development of emotional intelligence is reliant on social interaction. The outdoor environment can be seen as one which enables learning about social behaviour and development of the skills of interacting effectively with others, (Mathieson, 2012). However, this opportunity is not present in 2 dimensional digital play which may expose children to new knowledge, but, without the sensory and social dimensions, neural pathways are not formed in the same way, resulting in superficial learning experiences (Greenfield, 2015). Maslow, (2013), clarifies that children’s psychological needs for belonging and self-esteem must also be considered if they are to achieve self-actualisation which includes fulfilling their creative potential. Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj- Blatchford, (2000), emphasised that while digital technology provides the opportunity to practice specific skills, it cannot replace first hand discovery learning through (outdoor) play. Indeed, it is possible that digital play promotes fixed ways of thinking, indicative of and endemic to the behavioural disturbances experienced by increasing numbers of children in Early Years settings (Palmer, 2015, 55 Louv 2009, Greenfield, 2015, Christakis, 2016, Marrone, 2014, Mathieson, 2012, Drifte, 2008).

**Implications for further research, policy and practice**

Longitudinal, neuroscientific studies into the effect of digital technology on behaviour and learning are only just emerging and as Billington, (2016), determines, further research is necessary. However, a longitudinal study into the effects of early television exposure on the development of attention problems concluded that there was a direct, measurable correlation between television exposure and attention problems at age seven (Christakis, Zimmermann, Dgiuseppe and McCarthy, 2004). The study further identified that television programs specifically designed for young children may contain as many as seven scene shifts every twenty seconds. This inevitably leads to overstimulation as the neurons in the brain struggle to form connections between one image and the next. Overstimulation manifests itself in a range of pathologies including failure to engage with learning, inability to concentrate, and emotional issues, (Hattie and Yates, 2014). These pathologies are often evident in those children entering full time education for whom ‘school readiness’ is a concern.

**Conclusion**

Despite the digital dominance of play, the ability to play and learn alongside others in the real world is a key indicator of school readiness and remains a 21st century skill which has not been superseded by the need to be conversant in technology. Outdoor play therefore, continues to make a unique contribution to children’s holistic development that has become increasingly important in the digital age.

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