

OCCASIONAL PAPER 16 - Questioning the relationship between pre-compulsory education and school

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Introduction

As interpretative researchers with an interest in pre-compulsory education, we find ourselves challenging the relationship between education and school. In a time where 94% of four-year-olds are in some form of funded education in England (National Statistics, 2020) the expectation for children to be in reception classes from such a young age is clear. In this paper we question the relationship between education and school in a system of hyperactive policy change (Ball, 2018). By changing the conjunction between 'education' and 'school' the focus shifts from viewing education *as* school, to consider approaches to education *at* school, and what education looks like *other than* school.

We would like to share our research into different facets of pre-compulsory education through a consideration of parents choosing different forms of education, an analysis of partnership working through mathematical play in the reception class and learning through unsupervised play outside of the school gates. We hope to challenge current thinking that school starts at four and to question the schoolification of early education.

Why we are where we are in pre-compulsory education

Education has remained a key focus of government policy and its attempts to create a stronger Britain that can compete within the global marketplace. Through a detailed policy analysis, themes emerge around the impact of policy on the purpose of, and practices within, pre-compulsory education. These themes are centred around tensions between education and care and the enactment of pedagogy and curriculum (Neaum, 2016).

'The history of education policy is a mixture of reluctance, meddlesomeness, and muddle' (Ball, 2018, p.209), leading to confusions of purpose and pedagogy, that blur the boundaries between home, school and pre-compulsory education. Knee-jerk policy changes since the introduction of compulsory education in 1870 has seen a shift in focus from one of increasing the quantity of school places, to one of quality improvement. The introduction of parental choice into legislation in the late 1980's had a policy intention of driving school improvement. In practice, the marketised system of education has driven inequality with a reduced curriculum and a recent concern for children's mental health (Ball, 2018).

With this unabated bias for change and increased interference, it is not surprising that there have been far-reaching consequences that have re-shaped the sector entirely. There has been an increasing concern with a continued reimagining of what childhood is with a move towards entrepreneurialism as opposed to romanticism. The purpose of pre-compulsory education has become driven by the desire to satisfy neoliberal agendas and to raise international competitiveness rather than by the desire to achieve improved outcomes for children (Campbell-Barr, 2014).

There is a tension between education policies in England, and the role of early years practitioners, observed, for example, through the play verses 'school readiness' dichotomy that is evident in the early years curriculum and everyday practice. The dominant influence of the state, testing, and 'datafication' (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2013: 127) has created a downward pressure that brings didactic teaching and 'schoolification' (*Ibid*, p.127) into early education. School readiness has become the purpose of pre-compulsory education and the essential role of play side-lined in favour of preparation for key stage one tests. The early years sector in England has now become home to a vast range of providers operating in a unique childcare market that lacks parity and transparency.

The misnomer of choice, parent-teacher partnerships and the role of play has created an environment that has become a challenge to navigate for experienced professionals and parents alike. The recent phenomenon of Covid-19, lock-down and home education has shifted the landscape and brought into question the role of statutory assessment tests. Stakeholders trying to make sense of the sector are currently experiencing turbulence and inequity, and questions are raised around the sustainability and purpose of the early years and childcare sector in the wider education landscape. Our hope is that it may also lead to those behind the policy looking up from *their* desks to see the benefit of allowing young children to look up from theirs.

Questioning education *as* school

Compulsory education does not start until a child is five-years-of age, at which point parents are responsible for ensuring that their child receives 'efficient full-time education' (HMGovernment, 1996: .4). There is no requirement for children to attend school in England at all,

and what 'education' looks like is open to interpretation. Today the phenomenon of education *as* school is being challenged as increasing numbers of parents are accessing alternative forms of education for their young child (National Statistics, 2019).

Through a consideration of parental choice in pre-compulsory education the narratives of six parents based in one rural community cast light on the influences and process of choosing different forms of education at four-years-of-age. In each of these cases, the parents own experiences of education became the starting point for their narratives before being reworked through their experiences and intra-actions with the elements and materials of education. Different facets such as the candles used at Advent, a slide, coat pegs and sand pits became important in the narrative of choice. Even the toilet embodied an agential role that changed or reconfigured educational possibilities (Barad, 2007), important when combined with memories as a child having to hold on to the seat so as not to fall in, or as a parent worrying about hygiene.

The activity of choice for these parents was not a choice between schools based on performativity but a relational, dynamic, and iterative process. A Vygotskian (2004) framework, combined with the more contemporary notions of intra-action and diffraction from Barad (2007), revealed the complexities of choice with each intra-action representing a potential point of diffraction or change of direction. At times, the choice to be made became clear as if it were standing in a spotlight, at other times the facet of choice refracted or diffracted light, bringing darkness, confusion, and sometimes the unexpected. Together they represented the possibilities, relationalities, and entanglements within the process of choosing pre-compulsory education.

In this way, the process of thinking about education was (re)positioned as an activity based on history, experiences and intra-action within society. Parents associate their thinking with some things and dissociate from others until finally thinking transforms all of these separate experiences and intra-actions into an image of education for their child. What came to matter for each parent was found within the meaning of experiences and materials (Barad, 2007). The lived experience of choosing pre-compulsory education was a process of relationalities with the past, the present, and the future diffracted through intra-active entanglements with history and with materials within society.

For the parents participating in this research the possibilities for education were not limited, because rather than thinking about what is, they were thinking about what might be (Craft, 2000). Despite there being only one primary school within the town the parents within this study were willing to engage in quite extraordinary activity in order to realise their educational choice. From a

'logistical nightmare' of car sharing between numerous families, to starting their own Montessori school. Two families relocated, and one family changed their work and way of life in order to accommodate their Unschooling philosophy.

For these parents, making an educational choice for a child at four was not a simple choice of the 'best' school based on examination results and OfSTED reports, but was a relational, dynamic, and iterative process formed through intra-actions with experiences, society and things. In this way education was not just *as* school but instead became 'other than' school, as an embodiment of social practice where identities and friendships are formed; education does not have to *be* anywhere.

Education at school

Addressing the continuity and discontinuity between pre-compulsory and compulsory education involves an understanding of the relationships between home and school and between play and pedagogy. When education is viewed through the lens of practice *at* school, past experiences, present needs and potential futures come together in the situated relationship between home and school. With a recognition that a child's mathematical understanding is a strong predictor of a child's future success in school and beyond (Moss, Bruce and Bobis, 2016) education *at* school is explored through the lens of mathematical learning. By focusing on the borders between home and school, play and pedagogy, the role of the adults (parents and teachers), working in the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) is a useful theoretical frame to address the complexities and potentialities of partnership working with parents and learning through play.

The links between play and pedagogy are not smooth, and the distinction between child-initiated play and adult-guided play is central and a place for debate in early years education. While the former refers to a child's exploration of their ideas and interests, and an active engagement with their 'funds of knowledge', the latter is associated with the facilitation of play and a greater definition of activities by adults. 'Funds of knowledge' provide children with an 'intuitive knowledge-base' which teachers could use to connect learning (González, Moll and Amanti, 2006). In practice, both types of play are part of a continuum in which the emphasis between freedom and structure varies. The transit between child-initiated and adult-guided play can take place in a fluid manner on an everyday basis in an early-years setting and sometimes both types of play overlap. Overall, their existence shows the 'complexities of integrating children's or adults' purposes' (Wood, 2014: 151).

Research involving the use of a board game to support a systematic but playful approach to mathematical learning involved parents, children and teachers in one reception class in England and two early years settings in Mexico

(Encinas, 2018). The board game, *Our Shared Common Lands*, created a boundary object between home and school that supported collaborative learning in a playful context through a series of problem-solving situations in maths that went beyond counting, sorting and naming shapes, to involving movement, singing, drawing and collaborative challenges across all the areas of the EYFS (Department for Education, 2017). Mathematics became a tool to play the board game and for parents to engage in family learning as they worked in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) with the children.

The strengthening of relationships between home and school through a playful pedagogy emphasised the fundamental role of parent partnership working. Family cultures may be different to the culture of school, but in the playing of *Our Shared Common Lands* all parents used their 'funds of knowledge' (González, Moll and Amanti, 2006) to support children whilst also questioning their own assumptions about how to facilitate children's learning. Here, education *at* school became culturally embedded, arising through families' beliefs, skills, knowledge and their social practices. Funds of knowledge became funds of identity, essential for a person's self-definition, self-expression and self-understanding (Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014).

We argue that education *at* school needs to bridge the dichotomies of home and school, play and learning, to recognise the role of the parent in their child's learning, to value different cultures, funds of knowledge and identity. Education *at* school should not be about didactic learning sitting at the school desk but about a playful pedagogy where children learn in partnership with family, friends and teachers. Through the lens of practice *at* school, past experiences, present needs and potential futures come together and illuminate the relationship between home and school, where a playful pedagogy can support children from diverse cultures to learn maths while parents and teachers work in partnership.

Education *other than* school

Finally, we question the enlightenment led notions of purposeful education by considering young children's learning through unsupervised play. Currently children entering early education or school are acknowledged as becoming part of the anthropological machine (Agamben, 2004). Their experiences become planned, purposeful and managed and they learn quickly to comply, be quiet, sit still, and experience the work-play, human-other binaries; acquiring culturally appropriate subjectivities. An alternative proposition acknowledges the value of learning that occurs outside of school through unsupervised play, recognising potent competencies, flexibility and knowledge suitable for unknown futures.

Research involving 26 children sharing unsupervised play experiences led to a consideration of material agency and

the potentialities of a landscape of playful entanglements and intra-actions. Observations of one young child in free play outdoors exemplified material engagements through explorations of puddles and light refraction, embodied understandings of pendulum motion through swinging on a rope, and an affective response to movement that cannot be controlled. The child acknowledges the smells of the earth, acquires knowledge of soldier beetles' lives, and how yellow snails struggle waterlogged on the ground after a recent downpour. This child's play could change in a moment, flexing to cues offered by the landscape, and her affective response is clear. With an unfettered closeness to mineral, animal and landscape, there is an immediacy as she became entangled with the material experiences, generating potent intra-actions in flexible dialogue with her locality.

The contrast between learning in unsupervised play, and planned, purposeful education seen in schools is notable and we question how often children are offered a chance to just 'be with' and know their environs in this way. Predicated on a stable future and strong economy, many current education approaches continue to condition children to become part of the anthropological machine (Agamben, 2004). Although exploratory forays may be made into the world beyond the classroom, it is still the case that education occurs largely indoors, or in planned outdoor classrooms. Even Forest School now has training structures that perpetuate transmission models of knowledge reproduction; standards require leaders to demonstrate templated den-making abilities, fire management and planning purposeful activities. Children's play experiences become formulaic as young lives are directed toward predicted outcomes, assessed according to prior criteria. Children learn quickly to accept these binaries; of work versus play, human and other-than-human, orderly or random and undirected, purposeful or not. The transmission of binary values forms a process of acquiring culturally appropriate subjectivities (Hackett and Rautio, 2019) with related moral and ethical understandings.

All is not predictable right now and it is time to question this anthropocentric machine. There is a need to acknowledge different ways of being with the world, and value education *other than* school. 'We are all in this mess together' (Braidotti, 2013: 141) muddling through, drawing on playful potentiality, vital and creative (Lester, 2018). Meaning making and learning in such a model is dependent on the variances of the material world. Whilst we may be fearful of this unpredictability, the 'now' contains a wide range of 'potentialities' and intra-active cues that can lead anywhere. Learning occurs not just in school, but as experiential entanglements with the agentic qualities of the material world around us. With so many potentialities, it matters what choices are made (Haraway, 2016). Although teacher and pupil may be 'in it together' the teacher role could be one of not directing activity but facilitating space for entanglement and commutative knowledge, and of

offering 'conscientious guidance' (DeRobertis, 2017: 194) in the making of those choices.

Concluding thoughts

Continuous policy change has led to a confused landscape in education and the purpose of schools. Compulsory education does not start until a child is five and yet school attendance at four has become the norm. Parents are able to choose how to educate their child and yet the majority still send their child to the local school. Education has become something to be achieved, something that happens behind the school gate, something a little mysterious and separate from home and parenting.

In this collection of researches, we set out to draw together different perspectives on education and to question the relationship between pre-compulsory education and school. An examination of educational choice for a child at four raises questions over the positioning of education *as* school. Parents value education as more than examination results, as 'other than' school, as an embodiment of social practice. By focusing on the borders between home and school the important role of parent partnerships is highlighted. The practice of education *at* school cannot be separated from identity, culture and relationships and finally, education does not only take place behind the school gates but emerges through intra-actions in a becoming world that is full of possibilities and potentialities *other than* school.

By challenging the relationship between education *as*, *at*, *other than* school, education becomes so much more than the achievement in standard assessment tests at Key Stage One and beyond. Pre-compulsory education is socially and contextually situated; it is about competency, ways of knowing and identity formation, an activity arising through the intra-actions of parents and children and things. The education that takes place *in* school is only part of a child's life and there is a need to look up from the school desk to value knowing other than formulaic teaching *at* school.

This Occasional Paper and the research it reports upon, has highlighted, in turn, the need to step back from current policy requirements to review the value base (or to 'look up' from the desk) of pre-compulsory education; to acknowledge the complexity and variety of factors influencing parental choice beyond the statistics; to engage with parents in the borderlands of schooling and home culture; to identify education as playful, relational and adaptive; and, finally, to stop 'doing' the directive and allow space for intra-action with the becoming world both in and outside of school. This all requires an adjustment from the myopic emphasis on intervention for predicted achievement, assessment, ratings and league tables to a consideration of the more relational aspects of education in its widest sense both in and outside of schooling.

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