
Play-Based Learning and the Play Cycle

A Consideration of the Adult Role in the Process of Play



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The author looks at play-based learning as a concept that supports the holistic development of children, defining such learning as a continuum of a child-directed, collaborative, and adult-directed play and discussing the role of adults on this continuum. King introduces into the discussion the theory of the play cycle and reviews tensions in play-based learning between policy, practice, and the interpretation of play, using the play cycle and adult roles in it to focus on the process of play rather than on its outcomes, which also contributes to a developing understanding of play-based learning itself. **Key words:** adult role in play; play-based learning; play cycle; play cycle observation method; playwork

Introduction

THE ROLE OF PLAY within professional practice comes in three interchangeable contexts—play as a beginning; play as an outcome; and play as a process (Howard and King 2015). Play used as a beginning, for example, could be play occurring in a child care–related setting, as in a nursery where play helps settle children into a new environment. Play as an outcome commonly means play within educational contexts, often linked to development—for example, within play-based learning (Pyle et al. 2020). Play as a process, although it may have both a beginning and an outcome (if a child so chooses), focuses on how play develops and becomes led by children, for example, in playwork (Brown 2002). The role of the adult within professional practice relies on whether the play focuses on a beginning, an outcome, or the process. I consider how the process of play can develop more focus and attention as outcome-based play within play-based learning. The significance of the focus on the process of play

within play-based learning is that it better enables adults to consider their role in supporting children's play rather than directing or controlling it.

Play-Based Learning

Indeed, play-based learning is a concept used worldwide, including in the education curriculum of the four nations of the United Kingdom (UK). Play-based learning appears in the English early years foundation stage (EYFS) (Department for Education [DoE] 2021), the Scottish curriculum for excellence (CfE) (Scottish Government [SG] 2019), the Welsh foundation phase (FP) (Welsh Government [WG] 2015), and the Northern Ireland curriculum primary (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations, and Assessment [CCEA] 2007). Research concerning a play-based approach to the primary curriculum has been undertaken in Wales (Wainwright et al. 2020), Scotland (Martlew et al. 2011), and in Northern Ireland has been extensively researched (Walsh et al. 2006; Walsh et al. 2010; Taylor and Boyer (2020) have defined play-based learning as centered on “children’s academic, social, and emotional development, and their interests and abilities through engaging and developmentally appropriate learning experiences” (127).

In addition to more formal kinds of education, we typically use play-based learning in a child’s early years. For example, Wales has also produced a curriculum for funded, nonmaintained nurseries focusing on a play-based approach (WG 2022). Play-based learning also features in other country’s early childhood education—for example, in Ethiopia and Liberia (Wang 2018), Australia (Nolan and Paatsch 2018), Iceland (Gunnarsdottir 2014), Zambia (Lungu and Matafwali 2020), the United States (Lynch 2015), Canada (Peterson et al. 2015), Hong Kong (Wong et al. 2011), and Turkey (Aras and Merdin 2020).

Play-based learning uses play to achieve the outcomes adults desire—for example, literacy and numeracy (McGuinness et al. 2014), scientific concepts (Jahreie et al. 2011), mathematics (Ramani and Scalise 2020), and technology (Edwards 2016). Children derive social benefits from using play-based learning (Ali et al. 2018; Taylor and Boyer 2020) and develop language and literacy skills (Nolan and Paatsch 2018; Pyle et al. 2018). Research suggests that play-based learning supports the interconnected science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (Sydon and Phuntsho 2022). However, the use of play within play-based learning has its issues. These include the so-

called pushdown curriculum (moving lessons in reading from first grade to kindergarten, for example), the focus on learning areas of knowledge and skills (Barblett et al. 2016), the tension about the interpretation of play between policy and practice (Barblett et al. 2016; Fesseha and Pyle 2016; Pyle et al. 2020; Wood 2007, 2022), and the lack of free play to support child-led play-based learning (Pyle et. al 2020). These tensions will influence child-initiated and child-directed free play and the role of the adult in play-based learning.

Bubikova-Moan and associates' (Bubikova-Moan et al. 2019) review of play-based learning places the interaction between the child and adult in play as "child-initiated and child-led free play with voluntary participation, no predetermined instructional aim, and no adult intrusion at one end [and] structured, adult-led non-play with an avowed instructional purpose (cf. direct teaching) at the other. [Thus] placed in-between free play and non-play, one may find variations of guided play and play-based learning" (778). How children may meet this outcome places play on a continuum (Bergen 1988; Pyle and Danniels 2017) that may or may not involve an adult if effective pedagogy relies on a combination of child-led and adult-led activities (McInnes et al. 2013).

Play-Based Learning Continuum

Bergen's (1988) continuum places free play at one end and work at the other. Between, there exists guided play, directed play, and work disguised as play. Free play occurs when children have the most control over their own play (and it reflects the definition of play I have offered), and work happens when an adult controls the play for an "externally defined goal" (Bergen 1988). Pyle and Danniels's (2017) continuum places play with free play at one end and learning through games at the other. Between them comes "inquiry" play, collaboratively designed play, and playful learning. Some similarity exists between the two continuums, however, and Pyle and Danniels (2017) discuss the adult role along this continuum of child-directed, collaborative, and teacher-directed play.

Although child-directed and teacher-directed play places the initiation and control of the play on the children and the adults respectively, collaborative play involves both the children and their teachers, allowing the adult role to range from one of being "parallel players, teammates, mentors, and guides, to [one of being] mostly supervising outsiders" (Bubikova-Moan et al. 2019, 778). When considering collaborative play-based learning, there are two theoretical concepts

to take into account. First comes scaffolding. Based on Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (or ZPD), scaffolding occurs when adults support and help children undertake tasks (Wood et al. 1976). Second comes sustained shared thinking (SST). Defined as an effective pedagogic interaction in which two or more individuals work together intellectually to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative, SST can also be achieved between peers (Siraj-Blatchford 2009).

Concerning play-based learning and early childhood, the two theories of scaffolding and sustained shared thinking combine the nature of play and learning, demonstrate the varied roles of the teacher along the play-based learning continuum, and support learning and development in a holistic and mutually supportive manner (Bubikova-Moan et al. 2019). The early childhood teacher employs these concepts by focusing on the process of play, which Sturrock and Else (1998) and King and Sturrock (2019) discussed in relation to the play cycle.

The Play Cycle and the Role of the Adult

The play cycle was first introduced by Sturrock and Else as a theoretical model to support playwork practice. Playwork evolved in the UK from the adventure playground movement in the 1970s (Newstead 2016) and is defined as “a profession that facilitates children's play outside the educational curriculum in their childhood and young adult years (ages 4-16 years)” (SkillsActive 2016, 31).

Playwork education and practice are underpinned by eight playwork principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group [PPSG] 2005). The playwork principles focus on the process of play and reflect the definition of play in playwork principle 2: “Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas, and interests, in their own way for their own reasons” (Play Wales [PW] 2023, 3).

The notion that play is freely chosen and intrinsically motivated also occurs in play theory (Garvey 1977) and in government policy on play (for example, Welsh Assembly Government [WAG] 2002). It has also been cited to reflect the play aspect of play-based learning (Ali et al. 2018). However, Elizabeth Wood (2022) has extensively critiqued the tension and conflict between how play is perceived in theory, in policy, or in practice, including in play-based learning.

The role of adults (i.e., playworkers) gets outlined in playwork principle

4: “For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult-led agendas” (PW 2023, 3). An adult (or playworker) supports the process of play by choosing an intervention style that assumes control of children’s play (PPSG 2005). Whether children direct the play (free play) or a teacher or other adult does (work, learning)—or some collaboration does—play becomes a process as outlined within the theory of the play cycle (King 2022; King and Newstead 2020; King and Sturrock 2019; Sturrock and Else 1998), all of which has been discussed further in relation to adults’ role taking a more proximal role in early childhood settings (McInnes et al. 2013).

Sturrock and Else’s (1998) theoretical model was situated within the fields of therapeutic epistemology and the depth psychologies termed “psycholudics”—the study of the psyche in play (Else 2014)—which “re-inscribes play and the play process as the locus of healing functionality” (Sturrock 2003, 82). Although the theory was first proposed in the profession of playwork, we now use it in other contexts—for example, when discussing play and autism (Conn 2016). In Wales, the play cycle is included in the supporting resources for the Welsh Government (WG) publication *A Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings* (2022).

The play cycle provides a theoretical model that outlines a process for play. The process of play within the play cycle involves six elements: precue; play cue; play return; flow; play frame, and annihilation. We have precise definitions for each of these terms. The precue is a conscious or unconscious thought or idea within a child’s inner world which may result in the issue of a play cue. The play cue is a verbal or nonverbal action expressed to the child’s outer world as a signal or invitation to play. The play return is a verbal or nonverbal action from a person or object in a child’s outer world that responds to the play cue. Flow occurs when play cues and play returns are continually processed between the child’s inner and outer world, which results in the child appearing lost in play. The play frame is the visible (physical) or imagined (nonphysical) boundary that keeps the play cycle intact and allows the play to continue. And annihilation results when the play has finished as an element of the play cycle or when the play frame has no interest to a child (King and Newstead 2020; King and Sturrock 2019).

The play cycle is now established within the playwork principles (PPSG 2005), and both playworkers and child care workers use the theory in their practice (King and Newstead 2019a; 2019b; 2020). In addition to playwork and child care, the play cycle can be used in other child-related settings. For example,

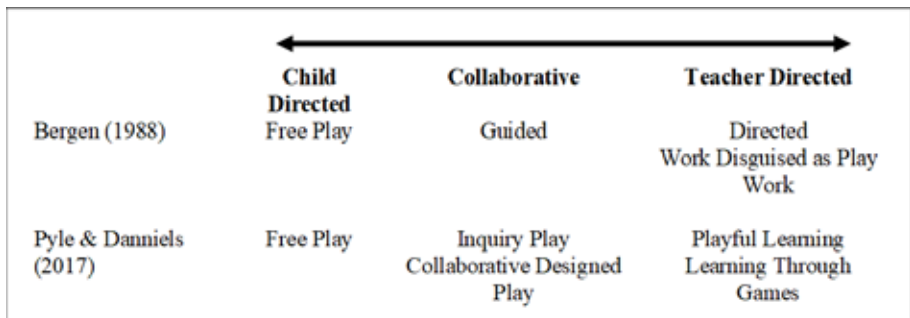


Figure 1. Types of play and adult role in play-based learning (Based on Bergen 1988; Pyle and Danniels 2017).

I and my associates (King et al. 2021) have shown how the play cycle can be used in preschool settings. The play cycle can, in fact, be used in any type of child-related setting (King and Temple 2018).

The play cycle focuses on children initiating the start of and controlling the process of play, with adults supporting this through appropriate intervention. Hughes (2012) argues that any intervention in children’s play should primarily occur when the children ask for it or provide signals they wish for it (for example, play cues issued to adults). Sturrock and Else (1998) described four levels of adult intervention in the play cycle to support children’s play (see figure 2).

Although the play cycle was first proposed to reflect playwork, Sturrock and Else (1998) said their description of playworkers “is intended to include parents and other adults active in playing with children” (73). Play-based learning thus includes adults playing with children, if more from a play outcome perspective. However, even for outcome-based play, there exists a process and that can provide not necessarily an alternative approach to outcome-based play but an addition to it. As Hughes (2012) stated about any adult intervention in children’s play, “Play is a process of trial and error in which the error is as valuable to learning as is the success” (281).

Each of the four intervention styles aims to support the process of play with an adult in both a passive or active role within an established play cycle. A passive role relates to play maintenance and simple involvement, although a more active role does exist for medial intervention and complex intervention.

A fictitious vignette illustrates how an adult can actively or passively support children’s play in relation to the four levels of intervention. Jane has set up an activity in her preschool for the children to make houses out of scrap material

(or what is commonly known as loose parts [Nicholson 1971]), and this activity considers what the children should make and the resources they could use—that is, it is adult directed. Jane asks if any children are interested in making houses.

The children see the junk material and decide to make things other than houses, and the activity becomes child directed. In play maintenance, Jane observes what is happening as the children explore the junk scrap material. One child asks Jane, “Do you have any dressing up clothes we can use,” which is a play cue. Jane notices the play cue, nods, and, with simple involvement, brings some over to the table as she responds in a play return to the play cues of the children. The children are now in their self-determined play cycle playing in the play frame of a small area of the room.

Then one child issues a play cue to Jane by handing her some junk modelling and some glue. Jane asks, “What shall we make?” The child discusses ideas with Jane and they agree to create a made-up animal, thus establishing collaborative play. The child and Jane enter a play cycle by making the model together, which we call medial intervention. Jane makes a noise and says, “It was not me; it was the animal.” The child laughs and they both make up noises. Jane and the child are now in a role-playing game with the animal they have imagined, making up stories about what it does in this complex intervention. This role playing leads both Jane and the child to create flow, issuing play cues in the established play cycle. Eventually, the child has enough and goes on to play with something else in what we dub annihilation.

Jane tidies up and leaves to put resources away, and upon her return, three children are playing with the remaining resources. Jane, in her play maintenance, observes what they are doing and asks the children, “What do you need to play with here?” The children reply, “Nothing now, we have what we need.” This then enables Jane to continue to clear away the unwanted materials. Here Jane proves sensitive to the already established play cycle and ensures that it continues by asking children what they want, as opposed to continuing to clean up and, potentially, remove resources the children may need to keep their play cycle going.

Two studies, one with playworkers and the other with child care workers, about their experiences using the play cycle in their practices found that it made them more observant and reflective. They had to think about when and how to intervene, and they waited to be invited to play by children issuing them play cues (King and Newstead 2020; King and Sturrock 2019). This aspect—considering when and when not to intervene—provides a new perspective for supporting children’s play within a play-based learning context. However, this perspective is

not a replacement. Although outcomes will remain at the forefront of play-based learning, the inclusion of a process perspective can only support both children in their play and adults in professional practice.

What the Play Cycle Offers Child-Directed and Collaborative Play-Based Learning

When considering the use of play within play-based learning, for example within pre-school settings, there exists a “popular discourse” that “further amplifies an image of preschool pedagogy as a binary choice between more learning, early assessment, and focus on school preparedness, on the one hand, and free, child-initiated, and child-led play with no adult intrusion, on the other (Bubikova-Moan et al. 2019, 776). This binary choice reflects the two ends of the play-based continuum of child-directed and adult-directed play.

McInnes and her associates (McInnes et al. 2013) found in their study on adult-child interactions within an early childhood classroom that adults who were more understanding of children’s cues (more child led) enhanced children’s “attitude and approach to a task and subsequent learning” (271) in which they took a more proximal position in the activity rather than directing it. A proximal position that the process of play has a focus within the learning that can lend a more passive supporting role (play maintenance and simple intervention) to a more active role (medial intervention and complex intervention). This approach to supporting play reflects the findings of McInness and her colleagues (McInness et al. 2011) that children perceive what they are doing to be play rather than not play and provide practitioners with an understanding of their role in children’s play.

When children respond more to adult cues—for example when adults intervene by asking questions of children about their play—this becomes potentially more restrictive than supportive (McInness et al. 2013; McNair et al. 2019). Martlew and associates (Martlew et al. 2011) discuss how teachers’ perceptions of play-based learning get interpreted differently “for some teachers[,] since it requires them to create an appropriate learning context that allows them to follow children’s interests and build upon prior knowledge” (80). In early childhood programs, teachers’ interventions in children’s play require knowledge, experience, and skills (Bubikova-Moan et al. 2019). Observing and responding to play cues enables teachers to follow children’s interests from the start of play, rather

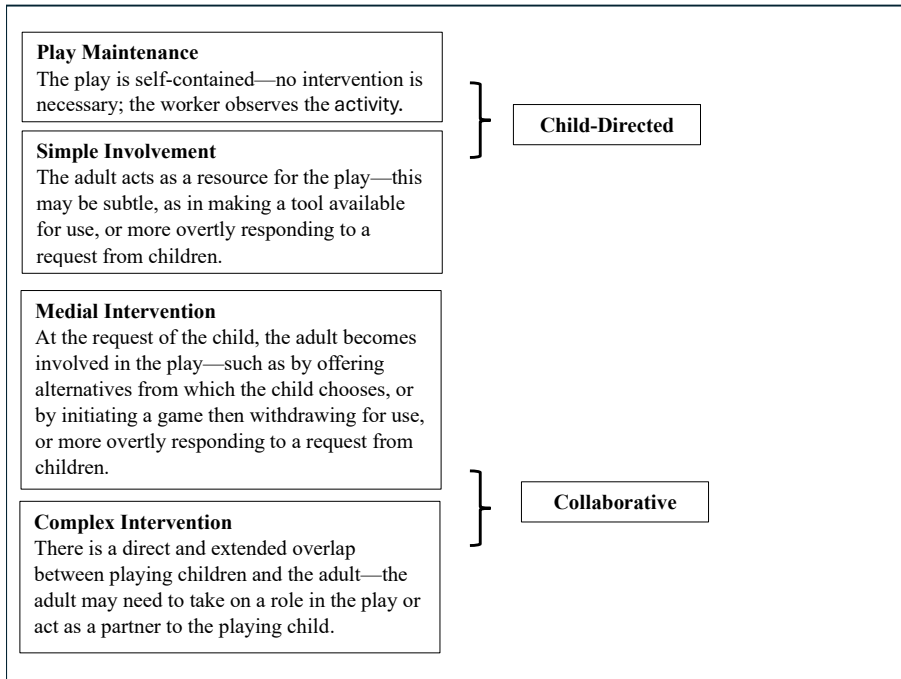


Figure 2. Level of intervention and adult role in play-based learning (King and Newstead 2020; King and Sturrock 2019; Sturrock and Else 1998; Sturrock et al. 2004)

than from the point at which a play cycle has formed, when children's play can be interrupted. Here the focus on the process of play using the play cycle can support teachers' knowledge, experience, and skills.

The focus on the process of play—for example, teachers' responses in early childhood programs to children's play cues—indicate that from a child's perspective this approach makes the activity involved playful (Howard and McInnes 2010). This could reestablish the teacher as a play partner (Howard and McInnes 2010; Howard and King 2015), which is important in collaborative play-based learning. In addition, knowing when and where to intervene is important. The hierarchy of the intervention of play maintenance, simple involvement, medial intervention, and complex intervention (Sturrock and Else 1998; Sturrock et al. 2004) can support the role adults occupy in play-based learning by considering when and how to intervene in play if necessary.

The adult taking a more passive role—for example, in play maintenance and simple involvement—reflects more child-directed play, in which an adult can

be more observant and decide whether to intervene or not (King and Sturrock 2019). A more active role for adults occurs in medial intervention and complex intervention, in which a collaborative play-based learning approach can be used (see again figure 2).

As Bubikova-Moan and associates (Bubikova-Moan et al. 2019) stated, the teacher's role in play-based learning moves along the continuum, and this relates to the hierarchy of intervention because adults can be passive or active in children's play cycles. When adults are active in the play cycle, for example, in collaborative play, the shared play can involve sustained shared thinking (SST)—the integration of children's and adults' thoughts and narratives—in which children take the lead (Siraj-Blachford 2009). Alternatively, if adults take the lead within collaborative play, this may result in scaffolding the child's learning and assuming a more Vygotskian approach.

The use of the play cycle within play-based learning remains an uncharted area, although the recording of children's play cycles has happened within pre-schools (King et al. 2020). Our current study used the play cycle as an observational method to record the process of play and the adult role in it. The study showed how the play cycle can be applied outside playwork, something that Sturrock and Else (1988) also wanted. Indeed, our current study was the second pilot study of the play cycle observation method (PCOM) which is now an established observational tool that play-based practitioners use to observe and record the process of play, including adult roles in play (King and Sturrock 2019).

Discussion

Play-based learning is used in many countries. For example, in the United States, the Head Start program incorporates play-based learning using either the "creative curriculum" or the "high scope" curriculum (Bishop-Josef and Zigler 2011). Although play-based learning uses play within the Head Start curriculum, Wetsel (2022) refers to play as an "underutilized resource" that practitioners need to study more. This point of practitioners having a clear understanding and application of play has also been stated in the play-based curricula of Te Whariki in New Zealand (Nicolson and Bracefield 2019). These are only two examples of play-based curricula, but the role of the adult in play-based learning will differ according to how we define play (McInnes et al. 2011; McLean et al. 2023). Wood (2022) states, "The traditional binaries of adult-led and child-initiated

activities, play and work, formal and informal learning are being challenged by coconstructive approaches that integrate structure and flexibility” (23–24).

Coconstructive approaches include collaborative play within the play-based continuum in which sustained shared thinking (SST) (Siraj-Blachford 2009) and the scaffolding of Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978) are theoretical concepts used by practitioners. In collaborative play-based learning, through scaffolding or sustained shared thinking, the practitioner becomes part of the play cycle in supporting the process of play, but always sensitive to the fact that children have control over their play, with adults acting as play partners within the play-based learning continuum (Pyle and Daniels 2017). This aspect of collaborative play, in which adults and children are both actively engaged in established play cycles, has been considered within the concept of the flow state (King 2024), which holds the potential for the sharing of ideas and learning relating both to scaffolding and sustained-shared thinking.

With a greater focus on the process of play to support outcomes, such concepts could promote different thinking and practice in play-based learning. Then, as Wood (2022) had it, “Learning through play is not just about storing new knowledge or information: it is embodied, relational, and dynamic” (22). This relational thinking links to the child-led and adult-led continuum where the focus is on the process of play to support an adult-led outcome approach or a child-led one that allows children more freedom and control in their play-based learning. Although curricula outcomes may vary, the process of play within the play cycle has consistency even if children direct the play within child-led or collaborative play. The play cycle provides a clear theoretical model of the process of play that could be incorporated within professional practices to support play-based learning curricula.

By focusing on the process of play, child-led free play can be supported by adults through play maintenance and simple involvement, in which adults follow children’s leads by observing and responding to play cues to take on a more proximal role (MicInnes et. al 2011) rather than an adult-led, directed role. This might address the issues identified by Pyle and her colleagues (Pyle et al. 2020) concerning the lack of free play within play-based learning. Additionally, using the theory of the play cycle and the process of play could provide a different approach for practitioners to reduce the tension between the interpretation of play and practice and policy (Barblett et al. 2016; Fesseha and Pyle 2016; Pyle et. al 2020; Wood 2004, 2022) in particular with adult and child interaction within collaborative play on the play-based continuum (Pyle and Daniels 2017).

Conclusion

The increase and universal use of play-based learning globally, for example, within early childhood settings will continue. This article provides a new way for practitioners to focus on the process of play using the play cycle to support and develop their knowledge, experience, and skill when engaging in child-directed and collaborative play-based learning. The focus on the process of play provides an opportunity for practitioners to support both child-led and collaborative play. In addition, where play is used to meet an outcome, the addition of the process of play can offer support. The inclusion of the play cycle may reduce the tension between play-based learning policy and practice and different interpretations of play in which the process of play occurs, whether play is considered a beginning or an outcome.

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