THE VALUE OF CHILDREN'S PLAY AND PLAY PROVISION:

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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SECTION A: INTRODUCTION

OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

The review presented here was undertaken by the New Policy Institute throughout the Summer and early Autumn of 2001. This project is part of the Children's Play Council's work for the DCMS which is primarily aimed at establishing how play and play initiatives can help to support wider government policies and objectives.

The agreed objectives of the review were to:

- Assess the published data relating to the UK's progress in meeting Article 31(2) of the UN Convention on the rights of the Child, regarding the rights of children and young people and the provision of opportunities for their cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities

- Create an up-to-date record of the evidence that exists to substantiate the arguments for play, on the basis of a wide-ranging review of the literature

- Establish an initial consensus on the benefits of play and the value of play provision than can link specialists, both practitioners and researchers, and non-specialists, including civil servants both within the DCMS and elsewhere in the government.

After further discussions between the New Policy Institute and the Children's Play Council, it was agreed that the review would also:

- Identify a small number of exemplar play projects that have been developed to support the Government's policy objectives.

A Focus on School-Age Children

This study is chiefly concerned with the value of play for children of school age. This is mainly because the benefits of play, and the consequences of play deprivation amongst this older age group, are under-researched (NPFA, 2000). Much of the existing literature appears focused on the pre-school age group, or to have examined the specialist applications of play therapy for children who may have physical or emotional difficulties.

Furthermore, there are concerns that within the education system, children are under increasing pressure, with the opportunities for free play being increasingly squeezed out or down-graded in learning value (Carvel, 1999; Macintyre, 2001). There are some anxieties that the particular emphasis of the National Curriculum may erode the child-centred principles of early childhood education based on play as a key means to learning (Wood, 1999) and that play is increasingly seen as "non-productive and insignificant", a stance which is influencing children's views towards play (Sherman, 1997).

Such shifts are particularly important given the increasing numbers of four year old children beginning formal schooling in the UK – a trend which is at odds with many other European countries. Overall, as society becomes more complex and competitive, there is concern that spontaneous play is being replaced with structured activities both at home and within school (Rogers & Sawyers, 1988; Mental Health Foundation, 1999).

Such a process is being exacerbated by a loss of space (National Playing Fields Association, 2000); the increasing commodification of leisure (McKendrick *et al*, 2000a), the heightened parental fears for the safety of their children (Furedi, Playlink 2000; McNeish & Roberts, 1995; McKendrick & Bradford, 1999) and a growing sense of increased control over children's lives (Petrie, Playlink Portsmouth Conference, 2000).

Set against this is the increasing awareness of children as 'consumers' (McKendrick *et al*, 2000a), new interest in social studies of childhood and of childhood identities (Holloway &Valentine, 2000), and of children's marginalisation in planning processes, especially those affecting access to their local environment (Adams & Ingham, 1998; Woolley *et al*, 1999; Spencer & Woolley, 2000)

It is within this context that a more in-depth and robust understanding of the benefits of play is now needed. Whilst there is a popular view that play is 'natural' or 'good' for children, more specific information about both immediate and long-term benefits needs to be elucidated – or alternatively, gaps in current knowledge identified. Similarly more information is needed about how children's play is adapting to the current climate, how provision is meeting their needs or not, or has the potential to do so in the future.

The Definition of Play

For the purposes of the review, *'play'* has been defined as activities which children choose to undertake when not being told what to do by others. The activities are freely chosen, personally directed and may take place with or without adult involvement. They may take place in the home; the street or local community; the school premises including the playground and the countryside. Such activities may be undertaken by the child on their own or with peers.

In reviewing the literature, it should be noted that much of the material is of a qualitative nature rather than quantitative. As such the approach taken has been to try and establish evidence on the *types* of benefits that play brings, rather than the *scale* of those benefits.

It was also agreed that the report would attempt to provide a 'bigger picture' of what the available information on play tells us about the current state of evidence supporting play and about other relevant issues which may need to be considered rather than simply summarising the research findings item by item. For this reason, some of the material presented goes beyond the definition of freely chosen play and discusses closely related areas of research including the effects on children of physical activity and of arts education. The literature presented is largely drawn from the UK, with a more limited focus on international data.

Wherever possible, in order to give some indication of the basis of the research findings cited in the text, some information about the study sample or methodology is given. It should be noted however that in some areas, as a number of the researchers themselves acknowledge, much of the work has been largely descriptive.

Consultation

In undertaking this work, the New Policy Institute has consulted with or requested information from a wide range of organisations, government departments and university departments working in the fields of play, playwork, recreation and leisure, human geography and services for children.

These include:

Government departments and units: the Department for Education and Skills (DFES); the Department of Health (Quality Protects, Sure Start and National Healthy Schools staff); the Children and Young People's Unit and Early Excellence Centre; the New Opportunities Fund; the Health Development Agency; the Countryside Agency;

Specialist play and leisure organisations: the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM); Joanna Ryan, Kidsactive; Jan Cosgrove, Fair Play for Children; Jean Elledge, National Centre for Playwork Education – West Midlands; PLAYLINK; Steve Macarthur, Islington Play Association; Camden Play Service; Birmingham Playtrain;

National charities: the Child Accident Prevention Trust; Education Extra; Barnardo's; the Children's Society; the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA); the Daycare Trust; Kid's Club Network; the Child Psychotherapy Trust; YoungMinds; Young Voice; the Gulbenkian Foundation; NACRO

University departments and research bodies: Polly Morton, Action for Sick Children; Helen Woolley, Department of Landscape, University of Sheffield; Gill Valentine, Department of Geography, Sheffield University; Stephen Rennie, Playwork Team, Leeds Metropolitan University; Peri Else, Sheffield Leisure Department; the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER); the Audit Commission; the ESRC; the Centre for Family and Household Research, Oxford Brookes University; Fred Coalter, Centre for Leisure Research, University of Edinburgh; Sarah Holloway, Department of Human Geography, Loughborough University; the Local Government Association; NACRO; John McKendrick, School of Social Sciences, Glasgow Caledonian University; School of Education, University of Leicester.

Independent play consultants: Haki Kapasi, Inspire; Rob Wheway, independent play consultant.

OVERVIEW OF REVIEW FINDINGS

The information gathered from the contacts made with a range of specialist organisations working in the play field and with university departments, many of which made useful suggestions of areas of literature to be included in the review, suggest quite widespread activity in both research and service development where play may be a component of what is provided.

This is backed up by the array of recent literature identified in this project. In particular, within the academic fields of geography and urban studies, research interest is apparent in children's use of and access to urban spaces, their use of commercial play spaces and what is called the 'commodification' of childhood (defined "as making a consumable product of an everyday experience and, at the macro-level, as the net effect of ever greater realms of life becoming consumable products" – McKendrick *et al*, 2000).

Alongside this, a variety of studies have examined the issue of risk, both from the perspectives of children and their parents, and how this may curtail their access to play provision located outside the home and at a wider level, may impact on children's levels of physical activity and on their independent mobility. Another reasonably frequent line of inquiry has focused on children's participation in the planning of provision and their access to and experience of their local environment.

The quality of provision, guidelines for promoting safety, for ensuring inclusion in play and encouraging access for children with disabilities, have been the subject of other published reports. Studies examining the growth of structured out-of-school provision, including learning or study support, the changing role of schools and the impact of such provision on children, and the place for play within the national curriculum, are a further developing focus of investigation.

All of these areas provide some valuable information in terms of where and how children and young people are spending their leisure time, how they play and their views towards what is on offer. It also identifies a number of quite widely agreed upon trends in terms of play opportunities unsupervised or organised by adults becoming more restricted, or the process "domestication ... the increasing control and supervision of play to get rid of its physical dangers and its emotional licences" (Sutton-Smith in Goldstein, 1994).

Data Limitations

Unfortunately, and in line with deficits identified in another recent analysis of the literature on play (Coalter & Taylor, 2001), the New Policy Institute review again suggests that, whilst there is widespread recognition of the importance of play in child health and development, in terms of **evidence** about the specific benefits of play to, in this case, school-age children, considerable caution is needed. This is because:

- Much of the literature is still focused on the pre-school and younger age group, with less attention on adolescents

- There remains a lack of systematic outcome analysis, most especially on a longitudinal basis

- The definitions used for play are often imprecise and the boundaries between play, sport, learning and education remain poorly defined; as Coalter and Taylor note, there are "unresolved disputes as to whether positive outcomes are necessarily related to *play-specific* processes or more generic processes (e.g. social interaction)

- Analysis of the growing area of out of school provision and the benefits thereof appears especially problematic in terms of blurred distinctions between organised childcare and play provision – and often a lack of clarity about the actual aims of such services

- The sample sizes used in a number of studies identified during this review appear to be quite small and often very local in their focus, which raises questions about how applicable the findings may be to other areas

- Data about young people from minority ethnic groups, those with disabilities and those with other special needs (for example, excluded from school or homeless) remains generally sparse

- With regard to specific projects where play is one of the core components of provision, evaluation data is often hard to come by – the struggle to keep up with actually running the project and the need to continually search for funding, means that many projects have not been able to attend to such information gathering.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The report is divided into five main sections. Following this introduction, the second section presents a brief background overview of the policy context surrounding play provision. This particularly refers to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which contains a number of Articles that are highly relevant to the opportunities for children and young people to play. The recently introduced Out of School Care Standards are also likely to be of increasing relevance in terms of opportunities for play given the rapid expansion of out of school provision recently witnessed in the UK (Kids' Club Network, 2001).

The third section focuses on the individual child and the benefits of play, specifically in the areas of health and education. The section begins with a general overview of the literature on play and child development, including for children under the age of five years. The focus then shifts specifically to children of statutory school age and examines recent (largely 1995 onwards) published literature about this age-group. Included in the discussion of potential education benefits are a small number of studies which have examined the views of teachers and children towards play within the school day.

The next section takes a broader perspective on play and looks at the literature on play and its effects on socialization and citizenship. The literature reviewed covered a broad sweep of quite diverse areas including children and young peoples' access to their local environment; their involvement in urban planning; where and how they play, and the factors which impinge on this.

Section E describes an array of government policy initiatives where play has been identified as one means by which at the local level, projects may realise national aims such as supporting young people excluded from school. Two concluding smaller sections contain details of some unpublished university research projects on play recently completed or now being undertaken by students of play work and allied disciplines. The report then concludes with some analysis of the implications of the studies cited and of the gaps in currently available information.

The material that follows is essentially based on the following:

- An overview of a number of existing reviews identified by the Children's Play Council, including *Best Play* (NPFA, PLAYLINK and Children's Play Council, 2000); *Cross-National Perspectives on the Principles and Practice of Children's Play Provision* (Candler, 1999); *Research into Children's Play* (NPFA, 1999); *Realising the Potential: The Case for Cultural Services – Play* (Coalter & Taylor, 2001) and *The State of Play – a Survey of Play Professionals in England* (Children's Play Council, 2001).

- A review of key books on play published subsequent to these reviews including *Out of School Lives, Out of School Services* (Petrie *et al*, 2000); *The Excellence of Play* (Moyles, 2000) and *Just Playing?* (Moyles, 2001).

- A search of published data held within the Library and Information Services of the Children's Play Council and the National Children's Bureau.

- Database searches of a range of specialist health, education, social policy and leisure and sport libraries.

- Internet searches of specialist web-sites relevant to these fields.

- Information gathered by email in response to requests for data placed on the Play-Children email noticeboard.

- A review of recent press cuttings relevant to the topic of play and children.

- The collation of a range of play project descriptions and project evaluation reports

SECTION B: BACKGROUND

The provision of play opportunities for children is dependent at the national level upon a number of key policies and pieces of legislation. These provide the context for promoting child-focused services, for encouraging children's access to a wide range of opportunities including play, for meeting children's needs and for ensuring that what is provided is appropriate and of high quality.

This section briefly describes and assesses progress in implementing firstly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, secondly, the recently introduced Out of School Care National Standards and thirdly, the National Childcare Strategy, all of which mention play specifically within the articles, standards and/or recommendations they set out.

THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) sets out 54 articles that identify a range of principles and standards for the treatment of children. The Convention was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20, 1989, and came into force on September 2nd, 1990. By 1994, the Convention had been ratified by 154 countries, including the United Kingdom.

A number of the Convention's articles are specifically relevant to children's access to and experiences of their local environment and their access to play (Adams & Ingham, 1998; Wheway & Millward,1997; Guddemi & Jambor, 1992; Candler, 1999; National Playing Fields Association, 2000; Petrie *et al,* 2000). These include:

- Article 3, which states that all actions taken concerning the child should take account of his or her best interests.

- Article 12, which states that children have the right to express an opinion on all matters which concern them and that their views should be taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting them.

- Article 13, which gives children the right to obtain and make known information and to express his/her views unless this would violate the rights of others.

- Article 15, which sets out the right of children to meet with others and to join or set up associations, unless doing so violates the rights of others.

- Article 24, the child's right to the highest level of health possible.

- Article 31, which sets out the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

In addition, Article 23 recognises the rights of children with disabilities - "a disabled child has the right to special care, education and training to help him or her enjoy a full and decent life in dignity and achieve the greatest degree of self-reliance possible".

Implications of the UN Convention and the Right to Play

Analysis by the National Playing Fields Association in partnership with the Children's Play Council and Play Link (Best Play 2000) suggests that arising from the UN Convention, playworkers have developed a set of values and principles about children and play which are set out in the National Strategy for Playwork and Training. These are that:

- Children's views must be taken into account

- That it is the responsibility of the community to ensure that all children have access to rich, stimulating environments that are free from unacceptable risk, which allow children to explore through freely chosen play

- Children's freedom to play must be preserved

- That all children, irrespective of gender, background, cultural or racial origin, or individual ability, should have equal access to good play opportunities

- That children should feel confident that the adults involved in play welcome and value them as individuals

- The child's control of their own activity is a crucial factor in enriching their experience and adults need to recognise and support this

- There should be no task or product required of the play by those not engaged in it

- That an appropriate level of risk is fundamental to play allowing children to develop confidence and abilities and that it is the responsibility of play providers to respond with "exciting and stimulating environments that balance risks appropriately" (NPFA)

- That adult encouragement and responsiveness must be available when needed and appropriate.

Drawing together other analysis of the implications of the Convention highlights three main areas which need to addressed in terms of a child's right to play:

- ***The provision of space***: "space is a basic resource that children need in order to play. It is by this measure that we can begin to judge how seriously a community is attending to the needs of its children" (Guddemi & Jambor, 1992)

- ***Consultation with young people***: is an explicit requirement underpinning the UN Convention; however in order for this to happen, children and young people need help in making their views known and structures need to be put in place to promote their participation in planning processes (Adams & Ingham, 1998)

- ***Integration of all children***: in particular, those with disabilities is highlighted by Guddemi & Jambor – "play is the right of all children", which thus requires the provision of play settings which provide "comfortable and equitable opportunities for integration of children with and without disabilities".

Analysis of Progress in Implementing the UN Convention

General concerns about implementation of the UN Convention are outlined by Michael Freeman in his recent article *The Future of Children's Rights* (Freeman, 2000). This argues that the needs of many children are currently neglected, including disabled children, gay children, girl children and street children.

Within this debate, Freeman highlights the "backlash against children's rights", also "the tendency to assume that now that we have a Convention, we have reached the finishing line". With regard to a number of the specific articles, Freeman then goes on to make recommendations for how these could be clarified, strengthened or gaps plugged, in particular in terms of how children can express their views. An earlier paper by the Institute for Public Policy Research (Lansdown, 1995) also presents a similar view of very variable progress in implementing the Convention.

The following provides a summary of progress in the UK in implementing Article 31 of the UN Convention, based on the three implications discussed previously:

Provision of space

Although now quite dated, Guddemi and Jambor (1992) provide some data with regard to how many countries had either standards or guidelines obligating the developers of family housing to set aside space for children's play. Their analysis is based on the findings of a three day meeting of the American Affiliate of the International Association of the Child's Right to Play and suggests only limited progress in this area by the early 1990s. They mention that only one country, Norway, had introduced a legal requirement to address children's needs in local municipal planning, and for young people to participate in the development of those plans.

Within the UK, information from the National Playing Fields Association indicates a steady reduction in play space including playing fields, open spaces and play grounds – over the last twenty years, NPFA estimates that one field per day has been lost (Kids' Club Network, 2001). Other studies paint a similar picture of reducing space (Coalter & Taylor, 2001).

Participation and consultation

Data from Save the Children is cited by Adams and Ingham (1998) which suggests that there is still a considerable way to go in terms of involving you people in planning for their local environment. They note that "planning decisions affect everyone, including children. However, provision for the needs of children and young people does not feature prominently, and the way younger members of the community are included in consultation varies widely".

This theme is also apparent in a number of pieces of research which have examined young peoples' experiences of town and city centres and their involvement in planning urban development (Davis & Jones, 1997; Wheway & Millward, 1997; Woolley *et al*, 1999; Matthews *et al*, 2000). Most recently, the Kids' Club Network report *Looking to the Future for Children and Family: A Report of the Millenium Childcare Commission* (2001) suggests that whilst there are now more examples of children being involved and consulted in service developments – for examples, children's play zones and safe play areas – these are examples of innovative good practice rather than standard practice.

Petrie's recent analysis of out of school provision (2000), which is based on an in-depth analysis of a wide range of services for different user groups and interviews with both professionals and families reaches similar conclusions. She suggests that "congenial and realistic ways of consulting them need to be found. Perhaps more importantly, we may need to recast how we think about children: not as needy recipients or consumers of services, but as participants, with other children and adults, within services". This theme is echoed in recent work by Moss (2000) who notes that in Britain, "the surveillance, control and regulation of children are dominant".

With regard to the right to play, recreation and culture, Petrie notes that providing these rights within the UK remains largely the private responsibility of parents, notably mothers, rather than wider society. Also that services which are provided purely for children's neighbourhood play on an open-door basis (where children can make their own decisions about activities and whether or not to attend) are declining, and with them, the ability to have a choice in the services available within their locality.

This ultimately means that both parents and children cannot make an informed choice – they have to use what is available, even it may not be particularly suited to their needs. This in turn has implications in terms of children's opportunities to engage in freely chosen play.

Integration and children with disabilities
 Petrie's analysis of out-of-school services for disabled young people, including play provision (Petrie *et al*, 2000), indicates that problems persist in this area, not least because access to provision has to be limited in many ways, often due insufficient funding. Due to places being limited, providers were often found to ration the number of sessions children could attend. Petrie explains that this can result in discontinuities in terms of children meeting different children on different occasions (hardly helpful to the formation of peer relationships) and highlights that at the level of public policy this is a challenging issue in that "the attendance of non-disabled children is much less likely to be rationed".

Petrie also makes the important point that whilst a local authority might recognise disabled school children as having the same right to play as others, "in practice, their access to a place within an out-of-school services was more limited than that of other children because they were more expensive to provide for than others, in particular because of the need for a higher staffing ratio". Considerable variability is also noted in terms of whether play provision included equipment suitable for the needs of disabled children (for example, large-scale toys and padded surfaces).

An important conclusion of the study was that disabled children's autonomy is much more circumscribed than that of other children, which in turn imposes limitations on their parents. On a more positive note, the study also notes that "the services visited had much to offer disabled children and fulfilled many of the intentions of their providers. In allowing children the opportunity to play, often to be physically active and, for many, to interact with their peers, they may be seen to be empowering children whose experience may otherwise be very restricted".

The analysis of the growth of commercial playgrounds by McKendrick and colleagues (2000) also raises questions about the extent to which integration of children with disabilities is being achieved in the area of play. This study notes that whilst many commercial playgrounds market themselves as a providing a 'non-discriminatory environment' and clearly have much to offer disabled children, parental concerns about the suitability of such resources are evident and affect the use of such resources.

The study concludes, "on one level, these centres have clearly opened up leisure arenas and areas of the city from which disabled children were previously excluded. Both disabled and non-disabled children share these opportunities. However, as participation statistics reveal, relatively fewer disabled children capitalise upon these opportunities, and among those who do, they are capitalised upon less frequently".

Integration of children from ethnic minority groups

Within the study of out-of-school services by Petrie and colleagues, a variety of comments are noted about children's experiences of racism and of inadequate awareness and training of staff to deal appropriately with this behaviour. The study also found that "few of the ethnically mixed projects addressed the needs of children as members of minority ethnic groups. Service providers seemed to demonstrate little awareness that the UK has a plurality of ethnic groups and cultures; many were unaware of the distinctive requirements of parents from different groups….". An important conclusion drawn from the study is that sometimes children are excluded from a service because insufficient work has been undertaken to make it acceptable to the local community.

Discussion

These findings suggest that in terms of public policy development to implement the UN Convention Article 31, a more active approach to service provision is needed, to be underpinned by structures which give young people a voice in the planning process and a coherent and stable source of funding. This appears to be particularly true for disabled children, where under-resourcing of services appears to be most acute and where access remains limited. There is also a need for research focused on out-of-school play services for disabled children since this has been largely neglected in the research field.

With regard to the integration of children from minority ethnic groups, progress in ensuring their right to play, a key recommendation made by Petrie and colleagues is detailed consideration must be given to the development of non-racist policy and practice and to the support of staff in carrying this through.

OUT OF SCHOOL CARE NATIONAL STANDARDS

The National Standards are a set of outcomes that providers of out-of-school care should aim to achieve. OFSTED inspectors will register and inspect provision against the National Standards and as such, these standards reflect an important development in policy focused on provision for children and young people.

Standard 3, Care, Learning and Play, is of particular relevance in terms of children's opportunities for play. This states that the registered person must "plan and provide activities and play opportunities to develop children's emotional, physical, social and intellectual capabilities".

The standard suggests that the staff should consider providing learning and play opportunities for children through a wide range of planned and free play activities both inside and outside including visits and outings.

Time, space, staff and resources must be organised in order to give children a mix of active times where children can take part in energetic play and quiet times when they can rest and relax in a quiet area. The level of staff interaction with children must also be carefully balanced. There must be time given for children to play and learn independently, initiating their own activities and exploring freely, and time when activities are more directed and involve the staff.

Standards 9 and 10 and Annex A are also relevant to the play arena. Standard 9 requires staff to actively promote equality of opportunity and anti discriminatory practice for all children; provision should be carefully organised and monitored to ensure all children have access to the full range of activities. Standard 10 highlights the need for staff awareness that some children have special needs or disabilities and are proactive in ensuring that their needs are met.

Annex A sets out the alternative criteria applicable to Open Access schemes and notes that "children attending open access schemes have a right to play in a safe and suitable environment. This is best achieved where staff with appropriate training and experience in playwork actively plan to ensure that children are not put at risk. Staff plan a programme of activities and take account of children's own preferences and choices".

Analysis of Progress

Advice from OFSTED indicates that as yet, no information is available concerning progress in implementing the National Standards including Standard 3. Data from the first batch of inspections, which is currently underway, is likely to be available later in 2002.

THE NATIONAL CHILDCARE STRATEGY

Within the National Childcare Strategy, which was launched in May 1998, the role of play is acknowledged as important, especially in the early years which should be a time for children "to have fun and gain the confidence to learn through play, through exploration and through a developing sense of their own selves in relation to others" (Children and Young People's Unit, 2001).

The Strategy consists of a range of measures to increase the range of childcare services, to raise quality and to make these services more affordable. A key part of the strategy has been to integrate early education and childcare and to put in place a framework for inspection and training. By releasing considerable amounts of start up funding through the New Opportunities Fund, the strategy has also sought to increase the amount of out of school childcare provision and therefore to improve access.

An expansion of the Strategy was announced early in 2001 (Children and Young People's Unit, 2001), so that current aims are to:

- Create childcare places for 1.6 million children by 2004, with a threefold increase in the budget

- Direct funding to disadvantaged areas, by establishing up to 900 neighbourhood nurseries, dveloping 000 out-of-school hours childcare places and recruiting 25,000 childminders

- To invest a further £16 million to support children with special educational needs and disabilities

Analysis of Progress with Regard to Play Provision

An evaluation of progress in implementing the National Childcare Strategy with regard to the provision of play opportunities is currently being undertaken by the DfES. Information arising from this evaluation should be available shortly.

With regard to other work appraising progress in implementing the Strategy, analysis by Megan Pacey, Policy Officer of the Daycare Trust (2000), has highlighted concerns that the Strategy is driven by the need to provide opportunities for parents to work or study and as such, key groups of families could miss out. These include children of unemployed parents and children in refugee families. Pacey's work also raises concerns about access to provision by parents who are students and families living in rural areas where services are "scarce and difficult to access".

Key texts

Adams, E. & Ingham, S. (1998) Changing Places – Children's participation in environmental planning

Coalter, F. and Taylor, J. (2001) Realising the Potential: the Case for Cultural Services - Play

Children and Young People's Unit (2001) Tomorrow's Future: Building a Strategy for Children and Young People

Freeman, M. (2000) 'The future of children's rights', Children and Society, Vol 14

Guddemi, M. & Jambor, T. (1992) (ed) A Right to Play, chapter 3

Kids' Clubs Network (2001) Looking to the Future for Children and Family

Lansdown, G. (1995) Taking Part – Children's participation in decision making, IPPR

McKendrick, J et al (2000) 'Enabling play or sustaining exclusion? Commercial playgrounds and disabled children' The North West Geographer Volume 3

Moss, P. (2000) 'From Children's Services to Children's Spaces' NCVCCO Annual Review 2

Ofsted (2001) Out of School Care: Guidance to the National Standards

Pacey, M. (2000) 'Childcare for All: An Appraisal of the National Childcare Strategy' NCVCCO Annual Review Journal No 2

Petrie, P et al (2000) Out of School Lives, Out of School Services

Wheway, R. & Millward, A. (1997) Child's Play: Facilitating Play on Housing Estates

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SECTION C: THE VALUE OF PLAY: THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD

OVERVIEW

This section begins by providing a summary of the literature outlining the importance of play. To the extent that it is generic, it applies to all children, not just to those of school age. Much of this material has traditionally focused on individual benefits – however more recent works have taken a different perspective and looked more at the benefits to society in general.

"Play is an essential part of every child's life and vital to processes of human development. It provides the mechanism for children to explore the world around them and the medium through which skills are developed and practised. It is essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth, intellectual and educational development, and acquiring social and behavioural skills" (Charter for Children's Play 1998)

"Play is used a broad term which covers a wide range of activities and behaviours which may serve a variety of purposes according to the age of the child" (Bennett et al, 1997)

"Play looks deceptively simple… but there many different kinds of play…. Play touches on every aspect of development and learning…" (Rogers & Sawyer, 1988)

"All children play. Play is a universal process, most evident in the young. Like the processes of eating, sleeping and procreation, play is easily recognised but not well understood. Every major reference to children since the dawn of time has recognised its crucial role in childhood. Without play there are no arts, no sport, no games. It is argued that it is the most powerful tool of all in developing understanding of the social and physical environment" (Rennie in Barrett, 1991)

Defining play

As the above quotes illustrate, there is widespread acceptance of the positive effects of play and there is a considerable amount of literature on the various dimensions of play, giving different definitions and taken from a variety of perspectives. These include child psychology and child psychotherapy, human geography, anthropology and studies of children's folklore.

However, as Coalter & Taylor (2001) note, "because of the comprehensive and complex nature of the claims for the developmental/learning outcomes of play, it is generally accepted that a single definition is neither necessary nor sufficient to capture such multi-dimensionality". This theme is also the starting point of the review of the forms and possible functions of play by Pellegrini and Smith (1998), who also suggest that "one of the most commonly agreed upon definitional criteria for play is that it does not seem to serve any apparent immediate purpose".

Unfortunately it is this variety, and the notion that it is the 'means rather than the ends' which are important, which lie at the root of some of the problems in providing robust evidence as to the value of play – or in actually agreeing what data is appropriate to be considered (Cattanach, 1998, whose paper raises concerns about 'mechanistic' views towards play).

This is despite the fact that its importance in childhood, in particular during the pre-school period, is widely accepted and has been extensively written about – again however, with much of the focus being on the pre-school and younger end of the child population.

Historical Theories of Play

Some writers have recognised two basic viewpoints towards the importance of play – one that says it is a **preparation for the future** and the other, that it is **an adjustment to the present** (Sutton-Smith, in Goldstein, 1994). Others have identified play as reflecting different developmental stages which children pass through, whilst others have identified different basic forms of play – for example, Moyles, who identifies physical play, intellectual play and social/emotional play. In much of the literature, the idea of play evolving into gradually more sophisticated forms as the child matures is evident.

According to Bruce (1997), historically play was originally seen as a break from work; another early theory saw it as the way that children "let off steam from the pressure that work builds up inside them". Gradually however, from the 1920s onwards, interest in childhood play grew and it became increasingly seen as helping children to learn. Sigmund Freud's work was a significant influence highlighting the emotional aspects of childhood play, with play being recognized as one way in which children could learn to control their feelings and to deal with anxieties and conflicts.

Bruce notes that "as it was gradually realised that emotional and social development are helped by play, those interested in young children began to understand that play also helps children to think". Piaget's theories of how children take in and make sense of experiences, took the understanding of children's play a stage further in the 1940s, with much greater attention then shifting to the importance of play in encouraging cognitive development.

Roger and Sawyer's analysis of the importance of play in children's lives (1988) suggests that play is an important element of children's ***motivation and therefore participation in society***. They suggest that:

- Children cannot be passive recipients of play and that since they are actively involved, this encourages autonomous thinking

- Play provides the opportunities to develop the skills of active environment building

- Play provides children with the chance to turn passive experiences – things that have been done to them – into activity. It provides a repertoire of experiences

With regard to the importance of play ***helping cognitive development***, they note that:

- Play is an active form of learning that unites the mind, body and spirit

- Play provides the opportunity to practice new skills and functions

- Play allows children to consolidate previous learning

- Play allows children to retain their playful attitudes, a learning set which contributes to flexibility in problem-solving

- Play develops creative and aesthetic appreciation

- Play enables them to learn about learning – through curiosity, invention, persistence

- Play reduces the pressure or tension that otherwise is associated with having to achieve or needing to learn

- Play provides a minimum of risks and penalties for mistakes

From the literature on play, Rogers and Sawyer also identify four other areas where play is important: in encouraging children to develop problem-solving skills; in supporting their language development and literacy, in developing their social skills and in expressing their emotions.

With regard to problem solving, they cite research from the early 1980s comparing children allowed free play to solve a problem, those given a demonstration and those given no activity at all. This suggested that the children in the free play group consistently outperformed the other groups – although caution is noted in such data given the differences unaccounted for in terms of children's behavioural styles and personalities. With regard to the development of language and literacy, they note that "children's first attempts to read and write frequently occur during play".

In terms of the acquisition of social skills encouraged through play, they suggest that this is probably the least controversial and widely agreed upon area. They explain that it is through pretend play that children learn to understand more than one viewpoint, and the views of others; that play encourages group co-operation, social participation and impulse control where the games/play involves rules. (Again however, no evidence is actually presented).

In *Best Play* (NPFA, 2000) the importance of play in a number of areas of children's lives is summarized, namely that:

- Play has an important role to play in learning – "play complements schooling by providing an opportunity for children to review and absorb and to give personal meaning to what they learn in formal educational settings"; play is important particularly in the way that it helps children to acquire "not specific information but a general (mind) set towards solving problems"

- Play is central to the development of good physical and mental health; the physical activity involved in most play provides exercise, encourages co-ordination and develops skills for the growing child. With respect to mental health, "many of the attributes enhanced by play are found to be helpful to developing resilience…" (to stressful life events)

- Play offers opportunities for testing boundaries and exploring risk.

The National Playing Fields Association summary also suggests that play has a number of benefits which develop over time, including that it helps to foster children's independence and self-esteem; develops children's respect for others; increases children's knowledge and promotes children's creativity.

Key texts on play and child development

Bruce, T. (1997) Helping young children to play

Bennett et al (1997) Teaching through play

NPFA (2000) Best Play

Rogers & Sawyer (1988) Play in the lives of children

Moyles, J. (2001) Just playing? The role and status of play in early childhood education

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More Recent Perspectives on the Importance of Play

In addition to individual benefits to the child, both *Best Play* and *Realising the Potential: The Case for Cultural Services* include discussion of the wider benefits of play which go beyond the individual child and relate more to the family and local community. These issues are explored further in the following section. These reports also discuss the adverse consequences of play deprivation, which could from one perspective, prove the benefits of play.

With regard to the adverse effects of play deprivation, the National Playing Fields Association report notes that children could be affected in the following ways:

- They could have poorer ability in motor tasks

- They could show lower levels of physical activity

- They could show a poorer ability to deal with stressful or traumatic situations

- Their abilities to assess and manage risks could be curtailed

- Poorer social skills could result, leading to difficulties in negotiating social situations such as conflict.

The report gives details of some research undertaken in Zurich in 1995 (Huttenmoser and Degan-Zimmermann, 1995) which suggested that a lack of play opportunities, coupled with parental concerns about motor traffic, resulted in considerable isolation of some families; that parents tended to accompany their children more often which impeded their opportunities to make friends with other children and to become independent of their parents. When starting at kindergarten, such children, who had been deprived of the opportunity to play freely near their home showed less advanced social and motor development than their peers who had been able to play out freely.

Again caution is needed in that whilst interesting, the study was based on a small sample of families. A number of other factors such as cultural differences amongst the mothers, and their ability to speak German, may also have been an important influence on the study findings.

HEALTH BENEFITS AND PLAY

Literature on this dimension of play suggests that there are two main areas of benefit:

- The physical activity involved in energetic play is traditionally recognised as of benefit to children in terms of providing exercise. This aspect is especially topical given the current widespread concerns about children leading more sedentary life-styles and increased rates of obesity (Dietz, 2001; Crespo *et al*, 2001). It also links to the concerns about the increasing restrictions placed on children in terms of the opportunities for them to explore freely and to play away from home (McKendrick and Bradford, 1999; Furedi, 2000).

- Play can enhance the mental health of children and young people. Again this is relevant given current concerns about greatly increased rates of mental health problems among young people (Meltzer *et al*, 2000).

Physical Activity and Mobility

The adverse physical consequences of decreasing mobility among children and young people, and a decline in active outdoor play, are explored in the work of Wheway and Millward (1997). They note that this shift has had a measurable detrimental effect on children's physical health and that low levels of fitness have been identified by bodies such as the Sports Council and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy.

In addition, Wheway and Millward cite other research undertaken by the Policy Studies Institute (Hillman *et al*, 1990) in the early 1990s which suggests that decreased mobility may adversely affect children's social and creative health – that independent mobility has been found to be important in promoting self-esteem, a sense of identity and the ability to take responsibility for oneself. This data was gathered by the Policy Studies Institute through a survey of children and parents from 10 schools (5 primary and 5 secondary) from 5 areas of England and replicated an earlier Policy Studies Institute survey undertaken in 1971. In addition, the 1990 study also included a survey of a similar sample of schools in Germany.

Caution is needed in interpreting research data on the benefits of sport and physical activity as supporting the need for play, since clearly such activities may not be the same. Nevertheless, research has shown that there are strong links between health status and physical activity, sport practice and level of fitness, including during childhood and adolescence (Ferron *et al*, 1999). Research has also indicated the potentially negative long-term consequences of a sedentary life-style and is increasingly suggesting that involvement in physical activity is a protective factor against stress, depression and risk-taking behaviours such as drug use (Ferron *et al*).

The study by Mulvihill and colleagues (2000, which draws on the extensive 1998 work by Biddle *Young People and Health Enhancing Physical Activity – Evidence and Implications* for the then Health Education Authority) states that physical activity is widely recognised as an important health behaviour in childhood, providing benefits for both physical and psychological well-being. Physical benefits include positive effects for blood pressure and on preventing obesity. Psychological effects include enhanced psychological well-being, reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety and increased self-esteem.

The study also notes that young people in the UK have become more sedentary over the last fifty years and that among primary school children, levels of physical activity are declining. Previous research also indicates a further decline as children grow older, especially among girls. However in terms of more interpretive studies to understand this trend, Mulvihill reports a noticeable deficit, with the majority of studies in the UK focusing on children's involvement in sport rather than in physical activity more broadly defined. The few studies that do exist however suggest that physical activity is viewed positively by children, and in a 1998 study of children aged 8-10 years, that the concept of 'being well' was commonly associated with being physically active and doing things.

In order to address this deficit in interpretive information, Mulvihill and colleagues undertook an in-depth qualitative study across five sites in England to examine the factors influencing children's involvement in physical activity. 60 children and 38 parents were interviewed. The study found very positive attitudes among the children interviewed towards physical activities, although their involvement in such activities is influenced by perceived enjoyment and of it being fun.

Crucially the study found that parents appear to play a central role in determining levels of physical activity and that a lack of facilities and play areas was a concern for many parents, which in turn affects the levels of physical activities engaged in by their child. Such findings clearly support the need for opportunities for physical play to be properly considered within the planning of local parks and recreational resources and indicate that such provision would be viewed positively and thus likely to be used by children.

In terms of other research identified on the health benefits of play, Moyles (2001) makes reference to physical play promoting a feeling of general well-being, and cites the findings of Wetton (1988) that "children who are physically healthy are more able to function properly in intellectual and social interchange". However, no supporting data of Wetton's findings for this assertion is presented.

Physical Activity and its Effects on Brain Development

Most recently, new work on the effects of physical activity is also indicating that more sedentary lifestyles among children may be adversely affecting their academic performance and that by increasing levels of physical activity, academic performance can be stimulated (Berliner, 2001). This research, which is still in its infancy, is based on the premise that increased physical activity increases blood flow to the brain, which when coupled with learning tasks, causes the formation of dendrites and thus increases the neural pathways within the brain.

A variety of school-based projects which have introduced more physical activity into the school day have reported positively on the effects of these changes in terms of children being more alert, gaining better scores in government Sats tests and in some schools, less truancy and bad behaviour (Berliner, 2001) – results which are likely to attract more detailed research attention in the future and which may have an important contribution to make to the play arena.

American research more specifically focused on play but based on animal subjects has reported a "strong positive link between brain size and playfulness" (Furlow, 2001). One study, prompted by the observation that play seemed confined to the most intelligent animals, examined the behaviour and brain size of marsupials and found that playful species had bigger brain sizes for their body size in comparison to less playful species.

Such findings have lead to a variety of theories that play has a vital role in particular phases of brain development and in promoting cognitive development - that "play creates a brain that has greater behavioural flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life". Again this is an area of increasing research interest that may in time produce robust data concerning the effects of human play activity.

Mental Health

Finally, in terms of promoting the mental health of children and young people, research by the Mental Health Foundation (1999a) highlights the importance of children being able to play and take risks and to use their own initiative. It is also essential for them to have opportunities to practise making and consolidating friendships and to deal with conflict – the basic skills needed in order to become 'emotionally literate', which increases their resilience to mental health problems (Mental Health Foundation, 1999b).

The *Bright Futures* report, which is based on an extensive gathering of over 1000 pieces of evidence drawn from professionals, parents and young people, refers to earlier work undertaken by the Foundation (*Listening to Children*, 1998) where young people talked of the importance of personal achievement for their well-being. The growth of out-of-school care and the importance of play in these settings is also highlighted. This may "provide children with opportunities to take part in recreational activities which may otherwise be denied to them – commonly involving children in creative artwork, physical activities, music, sport and drama".

This suggests another aspect of play in supporting mental health, that of providing enriching experiences that may help to develop children's emotional and social skills and may reduce the risk of them developing mental health problems later on. This theme is also to a limited extent picked up on in Gilligan's review of factors that may promote resilience (2000) where mention is made of "spare time experiences" (identified by Gilligan as including cultural pursuits, the care of animals, sport, help and volunteering, and part-time work, though interestingly, not specifically play) in helping to foster feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Despite these general positive points however, again no detailed research on how play may contribute to the mental well-being of school-age children was identified during this search of the literature. Much of the focus of existing studies has been on the use of play therapy techniques with children experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties - not therefore play as defined for the purposes of this review.

This omission is also reflected in recent DfES guidance on promoting children's mental health within school settings (DfES, 2001). Here no mention is made of the potentially valuable role of play save for a brief reference to playground interventions which may help children with emotional and behavioural difficulties engaging with other children at playtimes and of the use of role-play, games and stories to enhance students' understanding of others" within a curriculum using materials to promote positive behaviour.

Summary of review findings – health and play

- In the health field, much of the existing research has been focused on levels of physical activity and on sport. Such activities may not be the same at all as play freely chosen by the child and therefore considerable caution is needed in interpreting the benefits identified in these studies in terms of play. Nevertheless research indicates positive views among children and young people towards undertaking physical activities – but that a lack of local play facilities may be one reason why children are unable to participate

- New research on brain activity based on animals is suggesting that play may activate higher cognitive processes and that there may be links between brain building and play. Other research, on physical activity levels, is also examining the effects on brain formation. Both are likely to stimulate further research which may shed valuable light on the importance of play, but as yet the data is limited

- In the mental health field, the importance of unsupervised play enabling children to take risks, to think through decisions and to gain in self-confidence, has been emphasised (Mental Health Foundation, 1999). The increasing restrictions on children's free time are thus a cause for concern and require further research in terms of their effects on children's mental health. Overall research focused on the role of play in promoting mental health among school-age children is lacking, with much of the existing data focused on the use of play therapy with children already experiencing mental health difficulties.

- No literature on play and the health benefits for disabled children and children from ethnic minority groups of school age was identified during the literature review. This is an important omission given the particular concerns about the mental health needs of these groups (Bhui, in Johnson *et al*, 1997) and the research findings presented later in this review, that these groups of young people experience more restricted access to their local environment, including to play and recreational provision (Jones, 1998; Howarth, 1997)

- There is a reasonable body of data concerning the use of play for helping children who are sick and requiring hospital care to feel less anxious about treatment – although again, this often refers to specialist adaptions of play or play therapy which are not freely chosen or personally directed; as such, this literature is not discussed here.

EDUCATION BENEFITS AND PLAY

Literature concerning the benefits of play in supporting education has tended to focus on:

- Play and its contribution to learning, including the development of cognitive and problem solving skills

- The role of play and break periods within school and on behaviour within class – this area has attracted growing interest, possibly in connection with heightened awareness of the incidence and adverse consequences of bullying (Katz *et al*, 2001) and a widespread perception that there has been a decline in children's play - that 'children don't know how to play any more' and will therefore behave in a difficult or aggressive/unacceptable way during break periods (Bishop & Curtis, 2001; Blatchford, 1998b)

Play and Learning

In existing research, play is recognised as a major route to learning, particularly in children's early years (National Playing Fields Association, 2000). Play can support and consolidate learning from both informal and formal school settings and is widely seen as having an important role in children's cognitive development, although it must be noted that much of the existing evidence relates to the pre-school age group.

According to Bennett and colleagues (1997), early childhood education is underpinned by a long tradition that emphasizes the central role of play in early learning and development. A direct link between play and learning is assumed – "play is considered to be such an educationally powerful process that learning will occur spontaneously". However as Bennett points out, whilst the case for play may be strong ideologically, it is debatable whether it provides a coherent framework to guide education practice. A particular problem in the current climate of 'back to basics' and target-setting is that play is hard to evaluate and may not produce any tangible outcomes and yet teachers have to provide evidence of learning and attainment.

This theme is also picked up on in Macintyre's recent work *Enhancing Learning through Play* (2001) who notes that in the current pressure for children to achieve a range of key competences means that "there is likely to be less time for either free or structured play, fewer opportunities for children to decide what they would like to do and to determine their own pace of learning. To achieve the targets the children must conform to an 'outside' notion of what education in school is for, and to someone else's idea of what they should learn. They must, in following that agenda, confront someone else's problems rather than setting and solving their own".

To a large extent, Macintyre suggests that the value of play in education is in question because of a differing views as to what exactly education in school is for - to pass exams (which suggests the need for direct instruction) or a more enabling, exploratory form of learning (where play may have a greater role in helping children to explore and to learn from their activities).

Having suggested that there are significant questions about the impact of play on formal learning, within the school setting, two specific areas of research interest have focused on the positive outcomes of school playtimes: firstly, the impact of play periods on social learning and the formation of friendships and peer networks; secondly, the effects on children's attention span in ensuing lessons.

Play and Social Learning

There appears to be an extensive amount of work that, although largely descriptive and somewhat limited in terms of systematic evidence, discusses the role of breaktime within schools as a time for learning social behaviours and forming social networks. For example, Smith's analysis of playtime (Blatchford & Sharp, 1994) suggests that it is during these periods that children practise and develop important physical and cognitive skills, including practising language, role-taking activities and problem solving. Of key importance is the social learning that takes place during play times and of peer interactions.

This theme is taken up in Blatchford's book *Social life in school* (1998a). This indicates that breaktime has an important role to play in terms of providing a "forum for enjoyment and activity, play and games, socialization into adult roles, and cultural transmission; the development of friendships, social networks, social skills and competence; the opportunity for independence and freedom from teachers and classrooms; and the management of conflict, aggression and inter-group relations. It can also be a site of harassment, cruelty and domination".

In another work on play in schools, Blatchford (The State of Play in Schools, 1998b), again highlights the importance of the social dimension of breaktime in school, that this time is important to pupils and is "of value to pupils throughout the school years, though the nature of the value changes from primary to secondary". He points out that as children are far more likely to be driven to school than to walk, interactions at breaktime are of increasing importance since for a growing number of pupils, this may be the main opportunity for them to interact and develop friendships and social networks.

In reviewing what he terms the 'positive aspects of breaktime', Blatchford describes the earlier work in 1980 by Youniss on peer relationships and their value for social and cognitive development. He refers to the positive views among pupils towards breaktime revealed in a longitudinal study undertaken at the Institute of Education with pupils aged 7, 11 and 16 years, that break is an important time for socialising with friends, having a break from work, for playing games and for having some independence from adults. He also describes earlier research by Sluckin in 1981 on the culture children may develop in breaktime which is separate and distinctive from the school culture. Such a development, which is complex and rule-bound, has been recognised by some researchers as an important process for cultural transmission and socialisation into adult roles. It may also have a valuable role to play in the "acquisition and development of a distinctive children's culture" (Blatchford).

Overall however, the overall theme which runs throughout much of the literature on play and break times is that of managing difficult or disruptive behaviour or bullying, and as such, the positive contribution that breaktime might make to children's development, appears to have been overlooked. As Blatchford acknowledges, part of the reason is that the largely descriptive nature of the data "means that the social value of breaktime cannot be proved as such".

This deficit is also picked up on by Pellegrini and Smith (1998) who note that whilst there have been many experimental enrichment studies involving the effects of play on children's social skills such as role taking, and that many of these studies show positive benefits, considerable caution is needed. This is because such "laboratory-based experimental manipulations of play tell us how certain variables *may* affect behaviour; they may not tell us about the ways in which these behaviours develop in nature".

This situation is gradually changing as schools recognise that a positive breaktime experience will impact on school life as a whole and a number of initiatives have been focused on improving and developing these experiences, including environmental improvements, staff training experiences and support to facilitate peer relationships. Research on these more recent developments may in time add to the understanding of how play can contribute to children's education.

Play and its Effects on Children's Ability to Concentrate

A number of studies have examined the impact of play periods, in particular physical activity during breaktime, on children's attention span in the ensuing lessons and a variety of claims have been made as to the effects which emerge. These are discussed by Pellegrini and Smith (1998), and have been more recently reviewed by Coalter and Taylor (2001). Some of these studies have suggested that breaktime maximised primary school children's attention to school tasks when they returned to the classroom, whilst others found higher levels of restlessness and distractability.

As Pellegrini and Smith highlight considerable caution is needed in interpreting these results given that they reflect examples of experimental deprivation studies (in this case, depriving children of opportunities for locomotor play) and as such, the studies "can be criticised on the grounds that more than one thing is involved when we deprive children of play. So when children are deprived of social play, they are often deprived of other forms of social interaction as well".

These researchers conclude that the role of play in children's development remains controversial and unresolved and that more systematic research is needed before sound conclusions can be drawn. This is also echoed by Smith in Blatchford and Sharp's work (1994) where it is noted that "what children learn through playing may not be so great in a purely cognitive sense; certainly it has proved difficult to establish that play is anymore effective than instruction or classroom learning"

Folklore Studies and Studies of Children's Oral Culture

This quite distinct area of study examines children's play traditions and games and how these have evolved over time. In the UK, folklore studies have struggled to establish themselves as an academic discipline (Bishop and Curtis, 2001), although they are widely accepted in other countries. The underlying rationale is that analysis of the games engaged in by children provides a valuable insight in to other aspects of society at a point in time – the structure of games change over time to suit the social climate.

Whilst within the academic world there may a lack of agreement as to the value or indeed validity of this area of work, some recent folklore studies of the freeplay of children in middle childhood appear to provide some valuable information which challenges the view mentioned previously, that there has been a decline in children's play.

Based on detailed case studies which explore the many aspects of children's play traditions and which examine children's actual play activities in the play ground, and with an emphasis on children's own perceptions of play, according to the researchers working in this field, such studies provide a valuable source of data on the "vibrancy, creativity and variety of free play activities". The use of detailed case analysis also provides information on how children use play spaces including the school playground and "the ways in which children learn and adapt games and rhymes in multicultural and monocultural settings" (Bishop & Curtis, 2001).

The Views of Teachers and Children Towards the Value of Play

A recent area of concern evident in the literature on play and education, has been the potentially adverse consequences of the National Curriculum in undermining the principles of a play-based curriculum for younger school children (Wood, 1999; Keating *et al*, 2000; Wood and Bennett, 1997; Bennett *et al*, 1997). Several studies have examined this area and whilst they raise questions about the rhetoric and reality of play within reception classes, they clearly indicate that teachers value play within the curriculum. Especially for children at this younger end of the school population, play is considered to be important because of the children's stage of development.

Wood's study, which was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, examined the experiences of nine teachers who were committed practitioners in the use of play in the reception class. Whilst this is clearly a small sample, the study gathered "comprehensive accounts of their theories and approaches to classroom practice" and from this, it was clear that all of the teachers valued play and integrated it into their teaching provision. In different ways, all of the teachers were found to be experiencing pressure from the National Curriculum in terms of content and assessment procedures and yet to be managing to accommodate play within the school day – although in some cases, this now meant more structured rather than free play activities.

Perhaps most importantly in the current debate about play, the study findings indicate that the top-down influence of the National Curriculum was not seen as the main constraint on providing good-quality play experiences. Instead the following were identified – space, resources, some aspects of the daily school timetable and most especially, large class sizes and the lack of classroom assistant support, all of which were seen to impact on the quality of children's activities and on their learning.

In terms of the value of play, language development and socialization were most frequently mentioned by the teachers, and "there was a broad consensus that play was as valuable, if not more so, as formal, teacher-directed activities". Various examples were provided by the teachers of how they used free play experiences and exploration to enhance learning of the more structured subject areas, including experimentation with emergent handwriting. In addition, the integration of play into the curriculum was seen as a valuable way of fostering positive attitudes towards learning and schooling and in developing a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy in children.

In assessing a child's progress, "play was considered to have a revelatory function which could provide evidence of a child's developmental stage, needs, interests, knowledge and skills". Nevertheless, the teachers often found it difficult to find time for sustained periods of interaction or observation during play and there was a shared concern about the quality of learning through play, something which is also picked up by Bennett and colleagues (*Teaching through Play*,1997) In wishing to use play for assessment purposes, Wood's nine teachers often struggled with the difficulty that children often played to their own agenda, which "reinforced the view that learning through play is notoriously difficult to assess because of its open-ended, free-flow nature".

Furthermore, the teachers found it "difficult justifying the importance of play to parents who think that, if the children are playing they cannot be working, and therefore are not learning". In Wood's earlier discussion of this research project (with Bennett, 1997), similar issues are noted.

In the work by Keating and collegues (2000), the value of play was also a clear theme among the sample of adults interviewed for the study, who were drawn from 10 primary schools based in the North-West of England. Play was seen as a "powerful and productive learning medium"; a way of stimulating and extending learning, a 'building block' or 'foundation' upon which to develop future learning and "a means of promoting the child's whole development".

Again the tensions of balancing play within the demands of the curriculum and the requirements for assessment were evident in the study findings – which had resulted in play being regarded across the sample as a reward for the completion of work. It was suggested that written tasks provided more attainable and accessible evidence, also that "the strong current focus on standards…. seemed to be resulting in play being perceived as inferior and secondary learning".

Keating and colleagues also gained a strong impression of play being now viewed as an organisational tool for keeping children occupied when the teacher was engaged elsewhere. Crucially they suggest that a form of vicious cycle could be encouraged by current uses of play – "with the more able children finishing their work and thus having the opportunity to play, which then leads to enhanced social and cognitive development, and thus they finish their work more quickly, gaining more time for play, and thus the cycle repeats itself. The reverse could then be true for the less able child, who has less time for play and therefore does not experience the situations which allow developments in a range of areas and thus the downward cycle is perpetuated".

Clearly such a 'vicious circle' is an extreme example of the potential use of play and as such, is unlikely to go unchecked in classrooms. However as the researchers conclude, that there needs to be more research in this area and that work is also needed to develop shared meanings for 'play'. It would also seem fair to conclude from this study, and that of Wood's previously discussed, that the actual contribution of play within early years education, and the reasons why teachers value play, needs more extensive research. This is especially relevant in that what constitutes good practice and what is an appropriate curriculum for children at the younger end of the school population in particular, are matters of current debate.

With regard to the views of children towards play within school, many of the studies cited earlier (for example, Smith in Blatchford and Sharp, 1994; Blatchford, 1998) have highlighted that children have a positive view towards breaktime in school and in particular like the time afforded for socialization and meeting their friends. Other work, which has looked at some of the difficulties and problems which can emerge at playtime, has examined how involving children in decisions about playtime can bring about benefits (Blatchford, 1993).

As mentioned, there is an acknowledged problem with proving the value of playtime. Nevertheless these study findings are briefly mentioned here since, at the most simple level, they are important in terms of the UN Convention and the principles of listening to children discussed in Section A. As such, this is another area where more systematic research is required.

Several studies have also looked at children's views towards play and work in school and how they define these (Robson, 1993; Sherman, 1997). In Robson's work, based on children within three primary schools, and Sherman's study of 50 children drawn from 5 schools in a large city area, there were clear indications of children differentiating between play and work which seemed to reflect the views of adults - "that school is a place for work, and that play is not concerned with learning" (Robson) or "an attitude about the trivialness of play seems to have already reached these five year olds" (Sherman).

Arts and Culture

Finally, moving into a slightly different arena of play, the role of art within education and of encouraging access to cultural activities has been an area of recent research interest. (Kids' Club Network, 2001, citing the findings of NFER 2000).

Whilst clearly different from free play chosen by children, the NFER study into arts education in secondary schools reveals some valuable benefits of children being exposed to more creative processes and less structured forms of learning. The NFER research, which is based on among other things, an in-depth study of two longitudinal cohorts of pupils and an extensive survey of over 2000 Year 11 young people notes that increasing evidence suggests that art education can support child development by encouraging:

- A heightened sense of enjoyment, excitement and fulfillment

- The development of creative and thinking skills

- The enrichment of communication and thinking skills

- Advances in personal and social development

- Effects that transfer to other contexts such as learning in other subjects

Analysis of the pupil perspectives on their experiences highlighted the sense of satisfaction in achieving something and of the arts being a release from the stresses of everyday life and from other lessons. A number of pupils also talked about the arts increasing their awareness and understanding of other people's feelings.

Teachers reported a therapeutic value to these experiences, suggesting they had a calming effect on the pupils. Teachers also talked of improved social skills, of the development of the skills of group work such as cooperation, negotiation, leadership skills and listening. Developments in skills of interpretation and in feelings of self-worth and self-esteem were also noted – although one important conclusion noted is that the study revealed "virtually no statistical evidence that engagement in the arts boosts general academic performance at the age of 16".

Summary of review findings – education and play

- In the education field, much of the literature has focused on the value of play in the learning of social skills and the formation of peer relationships and friends. As researchers in this field acknowledge, even though the information which has been gathered is generally positive, caution is needed since many of the studies are quite descriptive in their approach.

- Studies which have examined the effects of play periods on children's attention span in ensuing lesson suffer from the fact that these are examples of experimental deprivation studies and thus deprivation of play may not be the only factor influencing the results which are in any event contradictory.

- Analysis of teachers' perspectives play in reception classes indicates that teachers value play within the curriculum. Play is seen as important in terms of language development and socialization and can also reveal valuable information about a child's developmental stage, needs and interests. There is a tension in meeting the demands of the National Curriculum, however other factors play a role in constraining play opportunities in school, most especially large class sizes. The increasing use of play as a time management tool by teachers, and the reasons why they value play, require more extensive research.

- A small body of literature suggests that children's views towards play are being influenced by the current trend in society to devalue play as a medium for learning. However much of the literature highlights their positive views towards playtime at school, in particular from the point of view of socialization and making friends.

- In two quite separate areas, firstly folklore studies of children's play and secondly, research into the effects of exposure to arts and cultural learning activities, it appears that there is some useful recent data emerging which may support the importance of play activities in children's learning.

- No literature on the benefits of play and education for children with special educational needs, disabled children and children from ethnic minority groups was identified during the review, a deficit which should be addressed as a part of any future research in this area.

SECTION D: THE VALUE OF PLAY: SOCIALISATION AND CITIZENSHIP

OVERVIEW

Throughout the literature reviewed so far, a common theme is that play provides social benefits for children and young people in allowing them to mix with their peers, to exercise free choice (to some degree at least) and in doing so, that their self-confidence and feelings of self-worth are promoted. At this level, the assumed benefits are largely individual.

However as mentioned in the previous section, some of the recent literature on play takes another perspective – with some proponents of the importance of play arguing that it brings wider benefits to the community as a whole. By encouraging the use and development of local community facilities, play provision can have a strategic use in bringing more widespread social benefits including greater social cohesion and the building of community networks.

Whilst highlighting the need for caution since other factors such as the work of professionals and non-professionals with children and their families may be an influence, Coalter and Taylor note that of the suggested outcomes of 'successful' play for the wider community include:

- Fostering inclusion and tackling social exclusion by engaging marginalised families and communities

- Tackling anti-social behaviour and juvenile offending

- Supporting families and communities by providing a focus for informal networks of support, and by allowing children autonomy within an environment which parents feel secure about

- Offering opportunities for exploring cultural identity and difference

These benefits assume that children have access to their local environment and the facilities therein, and that by having such access, a sense of 'ownership' and social inclusion is fostered – a point picked up on by Coalter and Taylor (2001) who note "the fundamental rationale for public provision of play is to facilitate the social inclusion of children – most of the presumed outcomes of play have implications for social inclusion…."

The literature which is reviewed in this section therefore focuses on the information available on children's access to their environment in the broadest sense, their favourite places, not only their current use of play and recreation facilities. Their participation in planning is also considered (a central principle of the UN Convention), also the restrictions which may impact on children's play opportunities and lead to their expressed preferences being unmet or ignored. Finally, the section reviews a number of studies that have looked specifically at the circumstances of young people from ethnic minority groups.

With regard to the contribution of play in tackling anti-social behaviour and offending, it should be noted that very limited literature was identified and this largely focused on diversionary activities and non-school skill programmes. In such studies, as Coalter and Taylor (2001) note, "it is often difficult to identify the precise contribution of 'play'. As such, these studies are not reviewed here.

Key Issues

Overall a number of predominant issues emerge from this part of the review which have significant implications for children's opportunities for play.

There is also an impression that these issues have gained in significance in recent years and link to the concerns mentioned earlier, about children and young people leading increasingly sedentary and potentially solitary lifestyles. Some of the trends discussed in the literature could be argued to mitigate against the social inclusion benefits of play provision.

Predominant issues within the literature include the following:

- A number of studies from the fields of urban geography and urban studies raise concerns that children and young people have been "conceptualised in urban planning as problems and the result has been their marginalisation and increasing exclusion from a hostile urban environment" (Davis and Jones, 1997; Woolley *et al*, 1999). Several describe young people expressing views that their voices are unheard in this arena (Jones *et al*, 2000; Matthews and Limb, 2000).

- What some researchers have termed the commercialization of playspace and the 'commodification' of childhood (McKendrick *et al*, 2000a) raises among other things, issues about access and about whether certain forms of play provision can actually sustain exclusion

- The recent considerable growth of organised out of school provision and the focus on providing 'care' and on boosting academic attainment through study support, is influencing both the nature of recreational provision and the level of control parents exert over their children's play activities. Play in this context, whilst clearly provided, and its value realised (Education Extra, 2001) is clearly of a more structured variety than the more purist definition of play which is chosen and directed by the child.

- Adult, in particular parental, fears about safety, especially traffic safety, are significant influences on children's independent spatial mobility and on an increasing tendency for parents to escort their children to and from more structured and supervised leisure activities or to prevent their children from playing outside unsupervised (Jones *et al*, 2000; Furedi, 2000; McNeish & Roberts, 1995; Mayall, 2000).

WHERE AND HOW CHILDREN PLAY – THEIR USE AND EXPERIENCE OF PLACE

Findings from the literature suggest a variety of venues where children and young people like to play, amongst which, public outdoor places are an important venue for meeting friends and retaining some social autonomy away from adult supervision (Matthews and Limb, 2000). These researchers note that "although there is evidence for a retreat from the street by urban children, for a substantial number of young people the street remains an important part of their everyday lives. Less than one-third of young people report that they never use the street as a social venue".

In line with a number of other studies, the study by Matthews and Limb, which was based on 9-16 year old children in three contrasting localities and which included a questionnaire with over 1,000 respondents, picks up on seasonal variations in the use of such outside space, with use not surprisingly perhaps, being higher in the Summer. One finding which perhaps is not expected however is that the use of the street by girls often rivals that of boys – although often girls will use the street for chatting and talking with friends, whereas boys are more likely to use the street as a venue for informal sport. Importantly the study also found that:

- Traffic is considered by young people to be the greatest danger and that "safe streets are those close to home or relatives, away from traffic, where other people are around" – which suggests that perceived environmental factors are restricting the mobility of young people

- The major reason identified for being on the street is that children have nowhere else to go, and that certainly for less affluent children, may be the only social forum, "especially as a large proportion cannot afford to participate in other leisure or recreational opportunities or choose not to do so"

- Shopping malls are frequently used by older teenagers as a place for meeting up with friends on the basis that they provide free, warm and safe places – although many of the young people described a sense of being watched or treated with suspicion by mall security guards. Again their use appears to reflect the lack of appropriate venues for this age group.

Wheway and Millward's 1997 study of play on 12 housing estates, which involved observations of over 3, 000 children, to some extent mirrors some of these findings, namely that roads and pavements continue to be the most popular location for outdoors play. They also comment that this finding varies little from the survey undertaken by the then DoE in 1973. They note that one of the surprising findings was that most children spent time playing where they could see and be seen, often in open view of houses. Part of the reason identified for this were parental restrictions, however the children themselves seemed concerned about their safety in isolated locations. Play in back gardens also featured in this study as a favoured location.

In terms of public play facilities, Wheway and Millward suggest that the most well used play areas were the ones that were open and visible – these promoted a sense of security. However another trend identified in the study was for children to be on the move between a number of places – which these researchers suggest highlights the importance for children to be able to move freely around their physical and social environment – an important activity in itself the researchers defined as 'going' and which they note is "crucial to an understanding of how children use their environment. The interviews showed that they have very definite ideas on preferred play spaces. What is clear is that they travel from one to another, trying them out, and meeting different friends. The travelling to and from, constitutes a significant amount of any time spent outdoors".

Such a finding is clearly important in terms of the concerns highlighted earlier about the reduced independent mobility experienced by many children, possibly due to the range of factors outlined at the start of this section. Furthermore, the study found that when asked for their regular and favourite place to play, the children consistently referred to green open spaces and if there was one available, an equipped play area.

However in terms of usage, other factors such as parental permission and proximity to home, and the feeling of security provided by a location, emerged as important influences. The actual layout of the estate roads also appeared important in terms of children not having to cross busy roads – a situation appreciated by parents and children alike.

In drawing conclusions from their findings, Wheway and Millward note among other things the following:

- that in terms of location, "estates which stimulate the highest level of outdoor play are those with the greatest variety of places and the slowest traffic" and that those which stimulate the highest range of play activity and satisfaction among parents and children are those with footpath networks, cul-de-sac layouts, public open spaces and play areas

- the majority of play is physically active and involves moving around locations

- children strongly desire play areas including green spaces such as parks and trees

- older children's recreational needs are not well catered for

- the front street remains the most frequently used location for outdoor play and for children to be able to exploit this environment properly, traffic speeds need to be reduced.

The study by Callaghan and Dennis for the Children's Society (*Right up our street*, 1997) based on a sample of around 60 4-11 year old children drawn from three schools in rural Cleveland also revealed very positive preferences towards playing in parks, the street and green and open spaces generally. These researchers report that in their study, the girls choices of preferred play location tended to be nearer to home and to be focused on social gatherings, whilst for the boys, the locations were often found to be further way. Age was also a significant influence on experiences of different forms and arenas of play, with younger children tending to stay closer to home and to play with siblings as opposed to peer groups.

Children's Participation and Access to their Local Environment

A range of literature with the fields of environmental psychology, geography and urban studies, has highlighted that children have been marginalised in the decision making processes and that as a consequence, feel that urban areas have no spaces for them (Davis & Jones, 1997; Woolley *et al*, 1999). This in turn can have adverse consequences for their use of public spaces – with some research based on an extensive survey of over 1,300 children in six neighbourhood clusters, suggesting that there has been a decrease in the independent use of public space by children since the 1970s (O'Brien *et al*, 2000).

Such research findings obviously have implications for public play provision and are also of relevance in terms of progress to date in meeting the requirements set out by the UN Convention to take account of children's views and to promote their participation. They also raise fundamental public health issues.

The research study by Davis and Jones, which involved semi-structured questionnaires with a sample of over 400 9-11 year olds and 13-14 year olds in four state schools in a major UK city, is an example of one of these studies which examines the problems arising from the failure to consult with and involve children and young people in the planning of their environment, to take account of children's needs and aspirations. This argues that "the conceptualisation of children in transport and environmental planning as 'a problem' has resulted in an urban environment which is extremely hostile to their needs and aspirations. As problems, children are tidied away behind railings, in parks, in gardens and –best of all – indoors".

The researchers argue that it is as a result of the urban environment becoming more dangerous, that children find themselves increasingly constrained – and that in particular, "opportunities for independent mobility and access, associated with the development of important life skills, have declined as traffic levels have increased". This they suggest should be a major agenda for public health and for environmental modification so that children "can begin to travel, play and participate in urban life without fear." Without action, the alternative is a "more physically inactive, less independent and less healthy young population", also that by allowing such marginalisation, young people are in danger of social exclusion.

Davis and Jones note that the findings of their study support the findings of Wheway and Millward that the majority of primary school children's outdoor play was active and that 'hanging out' was a valued activity. However for many, dirt, lack of safety and traffic noise were perceived to be major problems.

They conclude that "the views of children and young people are worth listening to, if urban planners are to create environments in which young citizens can participate. If they continue to be, as at present, marginalised in planning and policy making then the high (to some worryingly high) numbers who spend most of their out of school time watching television and playing computer games, and being driven to leisure activities in parents' cars, will continue to increase".

The Growth of Commercial Playgrounds and Supervised Activities

Interest in the growing commercialization of play provision and of the considerable expansion of out of school provision, is evident in a number of areas of the literature, with both developments having implications for children's opportunities for free play – in particular because such provision usually involves parental choice and often has a cost implication which also requires adult agreement.

According to McKendrick and colleagues (2000b), "the growth of commercial playgrounds in the UK is adult-led and can be attributed to the conjunction of a umber of discrete trends that rendered their development viable". These include the proliferation of the service and leisure industries, the availability of land and buildings and the growing recognition of children as consumers. The trends already mentioned of greater control over children's play activities, driven in part by parents concerns for safety and concerns about the quality of facilities within the local environment, are other likely factors (McKendrick *et al*, 2000c). Another important influence has been a major change in family life which has taken place over the last few decades – that of leisure as a shared family experience (McKendrick *et al*, 2000c)

In other analysis of this form of playspace, which can include a range of play environments, McKendrick and colleagues (2000a) note that it is "overly simplistic to suggest that these new developments are testimony to the new-found consumer power of children. Children play a marginal role: in the production of these play environments; in contributing to parents' information field prior to decision-making, and in the visit decision-making process". It is this aspect of commercial play provision that goes against the definition of play as something chosen and directed by the child.

Furthermore, commercial playgrounds, "largely based on pay-for-play, raises the possibility that they will not cater for *all* groups" and could therefore potentially be a cause of exclusion – a finding confirmed by McKendrick from other research which systematically examined patterns of participation and found that non-car owning and large families were under-represented among users (although other findings confounded expectations in terms of family structure and family work status – where it was found that children of lone parent families and those with fewer working adults, were as likely to visit as children from two parent families and those in work-rich households).

With regard to the trend towards increasingly supervised leisure and recreational activities in out-of school hours, a number of studies have highlighted the significant expansion of out of school clubs, often to provide childcare for working parents or to promote study support (Smith and Barker, 1997). Data from Kids' Clubs Network suggests that since the launch of the National Childcare Strategy in 1998, this expansion has increased and that since 1997, the number of clubs has doubled to reach 7, 000.

By 2004, there are set to be up to 12, 000 clubs, one for nearly half of all schools in the UK (Kids' Club Network, 2001b). Whilst acknowledging the support offered by such clubs, the wealth of activities they can offer and the positive views of the children and young people who attend them (Kids' Club Network, 2001c) such a trend clearly has implications for opportunities for free play.

Restrictions on Children's Play – Parental Concerns and Environmental Factors

A range of recent studies have highlighted that parental concerns about safety in the local environment, and in particular, the dangers posed by traffic, are resulting in children's independent mobility and their opportunities for free play being restricted (Furedi, 2000; Matthews and Limb, 2000; Wheway and Millward, 1997; Jones *et al,* 2000; McNeish and Roberts, 1995; Child Accident Prevention Trust, 1999).

For example, in the McNeish and Roberts study for Barnardos, a range of findings from a survey of 94 parents and 62 children, identified via a range of Barnardos projects from across the UK highlight the fears of parents and the ensuing effects:

- 60% reported being very worried when their children were playing out

- Danger from strangers was reported to be the biggest worry (66%), followed by danger from traffic (60%), drugs (49%), bullying (36%) and danger from dogs (27%).

- Most thought their neighbourhood was unsafe for children, with 31% rating it very unsafe and 39% fairly unsafe

- Play facilities were reported as generally poor, with 35% saying there was no playground in their neighbourhood. Most children played in their garden or yard (44%) or on the street (33%).

- The lack of facilities and parental anxieties were found to be affecting children's play experiences – 44% of the parents reported that their children never or hardly ever play out without adult supervision

- These fears were also diminishing the independence of children to walk to school

Furedi's analysis of parental fears (Playlink, 2000) highlights similar widespread concerns. He cites the findings of a 1998 MORI poll of more than 500 parents which found that almost 80% would not let their children play unsupervised in the park during their Summer holiday for fear of danger. A NOP poll the following year reported a similar figure.

The findings of the study by Huttenmoser and colleagues referred to earlier in the report (page 21), also highlighted the role of parental concerns about the safety of their neighbourhood, about traffic safety and how these impacted on the childrens' opportunities for playing out, making friends and social networks, and their abilities on starting nursery school. Such studies, whilst small-scale, are thus important in providing valuable information on parents' perceptions of their environment and on the safety of their children, which in turn, may provide some important pointers to aspects of the environment which require attention if opportunities for free play are to be promoted.

On this basis, another study based in Germany, does provide some interesting data about how environmental factors could be improved which may in time serve to reduce parents' fears about letting their children out to play. In a recent study of 278 children who had experienced a pedestrian or cycling injury, von Kries and colleagues (1998) undertook an in-depth risk analysis on the basis of the numbers of streets with 30 kph speed limits, the numbers with traffic lights and pelican crossings, and the provision of playgrounds in the vicinity of the children's homes.

The study involved a detailed case control design and attempted to minimise bias by checking data with national results. From their results, the researchers conclude that "it appears that increasing the number of streets with a speed limit of 30kph, increasing the density of pelican pedestrian crossings on streets with a speed limit of 50kph or above, and increasing the number of playgrounds is likely to be effective in reducing the risk of traffic injuries to school age children".

Whilst encouraging, some caution is needed with the study findings in that as the researchers acknowledge, the study did not measure traffic density, nor could it account for socio-economic/ social class variations die to Germany's data protection laws, both of which could have some influence on the data.

With regard to children's fears of their local environment and how this influences their mobility and access to local facilities, the McNeish and Roberts study just described, notes that the children were very aware of their parents' fears. Several other studies have highlighted that children and young people share the concerns of adults about traffic (Woolley *et al*, 1999), and that, in one study of 349 young people aged 13-14, drawn from three locations in the Midelands, that these fears meant that the young people were less likely to travel unaccompanied, even in their local areas (Jones *et al*, 2000)

SPECIFIC GROUPS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Children from Ethnic Minority Groups

A number of studies focused on ethnic minority groups, indicate that their use of public open space and their use of play and recreational facilities, is more restricted than for other groups, as a result of a range of complex environmental and family factors (Woolley and ul-Amin, 1999; Howarth, 1997; Ravenscroft and Markwell, 2000; Kapasi, 2001).

Generally this is an area of research that has received only limited attention, certainly up until recently. However, a general theme evident in the studies which have been identified is that young women in particular, experience considerable restrictions on their access to public recreational facilities (Jones, 1998). Several recent studies have highlighted factors that may help to improve access to play provision for this group.

In examining the experiences of a sample of 214 young women aged between 11-14, of who just under half were of Asian origin, Jones found that the girls of Asian origin experienced more problems encountering hostile urban environments than the non-Asian girls, and that fears about assault and racial and sexual harrassment resulted in a more home-focused style of life. The Asian girls also reported restrictions on their physical activity and frustration about their lack of freedom.

Specific areas of concern for the Asian girls included fear of unaccompanied travel, of rape or attack, as a result of which, Asian girls were much more likely to travel with relatives. It also appears that parental restrictions on Asian girls increase when they become teenagers.

In Kapasi's recently updated work on Asian children playing, (*Asian Children Playing*, 2001) concerns about safety are also apparent, in particular, physical safety and supervision within play settings where both sexes attend. The study, which undertook questionnaires, interviews, focus group meetings and field visits to play projects in six areas of the country, also found that one problem in accessing play projects is that the daily lives of Asian children do not conform to those of white and African Caribbean children, which meant that often the projects were open at times when they could not attend. Travel limitations were another factor identified limiting access for young Asian girls in particular.

The study findings pose some fundamental questions about the level of integration of Asian children into play projects, and about racism, on the basis of observations of play behaviour in mixed play provision. These found that Asian children played separately from non-Asian children. In addition, some of the children indicated a clear sense of not being understood. As Kapasi discusses, this highlights the need for effective staff training to challenge racism and also, the importance of employing Asian staff.

The study also found a considerable under-use of play provision by Asian girls in comparison to Asian boys. Parental fears about safety were again prominent – with the provision of transport to some girls groups resulting in increased usage. Community-led groups which ran separate provision for girls and boys were found to be the most successful in working with large numbers of girls – although a number of girls only groups had folded due to a lack of support and resources from local authority providers.

Children with Disabilities

Research on the use of play provision by children with disabilities appears to be particularly limited, and very little literature was identified in this review. In the Kapasi study just mentioned, the use of play projects by disabled Asian children is mentioned, to the effect that this group of children are particularly under-represented in their use of such resources and that Asian families with disabled children were found to face "severe institutional discrimination".

Identified barriers to access included language difficulties, racist attitudes of service providers and a lack of information about support services. There was also an assumption that "disabled Asian children were looked after by extended families", which clearly denied their right to participate as an equal member of the community.

With regard to other research concerning children with disabilities, the recent study by Petrie and colleagues (2000) discussed in Section B, raises concerns about problems with access to play provision by children with disabilities, often due to funding limitations leading to places being restricted. Recent research by Kids' Club Network (2001D) also notes that provision for disabled children in kids' clubs is inadequate; a 1997 survey undertaken by the Network found that only 21% of clubs provided places for disabled children, although more encouragingly, 78% of club co-ordinators reported providing a service for 'all' children and 70% of clubs had disabled access.

Earlier research (Petrie and Poland, 1998) highlighted the importance of play provision for disabled children as a means of making friends, and work by McKendrick and colleagues (1998) highlighted that in a survey of parents with children attending special schools, three quarters of the parents felt that play providers did not cater for the specific needs of their disabled children. The majority of these parents also indicated that they wanted their children to play more often with children who were not disabled.

In terms of commercial play spaces, McKendrick and colleagues found that most centres have easy wheelchair access and provide a suitably wide range of opportunities. However the researchers note that the often multi-storey layout and the physically demanding nature of much of the play equipment, may serve to restrict play opportunities for physically disabled children. In addition, the crowded nature of many of the centres does little to encourage integrative play. Nevertheless, the study also concluded that "despite the problems which many soft-play areas present, disabled children reported enjoying themselves"

Summary of findings – socialization and citizenship

A variety of factors are impacting on children's opportunities for free play and for socialization, including:

- Trends towards increasing commercialization of playspaces and the growth of organised out of school provision, both of which reflect a shift towards more organised, adult-led forms of activity

- Limited progress in involving young people in planning for their environment and indeed, some suggestions that young people are being conceptualised as 'a problem' and further marginalised, which in turns creates a perception of a hostile environment with no spaces for them

- Parental safety fears, in particular fears about traffic, are leading to parents exerting more control over their children's activities and opportunities to play out

- For children from ethnic minority groups, a range of factors are serving to limit their use of play provision, including fears of assualt when travelling, racism and concerns about safety; girls especially are restricted by these concerns

- For children with disabilities, there are concerns about a lack of suitable resources – however in this area particularly, good research data is lacking.

- Despite all of the above, information on children's play preferences indicates a strong wish to play outdoors, in green and open spaces which are visible to those around them.

- The provision of roads with reduced speed limits and a cul-de-sac layout enhance the chances of physically active outdoor play – to which end the limited available research on the positive effects of reducing speed limits (von Kries, 1998) warrants further attention.

- An overwhelming argument running through this literature is of the importance of effectively consulting with children and young people, in listening to their views and aspirations and in involving them in planning, particularly in urban areas.

SECTION E: GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES AND PLAY CASE STUDIES

OVERVIEW

Examination of a range of projects and strategies arising from national social and economic initiatives such as *Sure Start* and *Quality Protects*, various DfES and Children and Young People's Unit initiatives and a number of Home Office or Youth Justice Board projects to reduce offending, truancy and exclusion in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, suggest that in a number of different ways, play is being used within projects to support children and families or to engage older teenagers.

Funding for provision has come from a variety of sources including the New Opportunities Fund (NOF), the Department of Health, the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), from Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) and from a range of voluntary sector organisations. A notable tendency is for many of the initiatives to be based on short-term projects or to be highly targeted, which obviously raises questions about general accessibility to, and longer-term sustainability of, such provision.

Some of the examples given below clearly fall into the category of more structured activity or sport rather than free play. They are included however to give as wide a picture as possible of current activity where play may be a component of what is provided. Some are also more clearly aimed at improving educational standards rather than recognising the value of play activities in their own right.

EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS INCORPORATING PLAY WITHIN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

(1) Summer Activities for 16 year olds – DfES initiative

The Summer Activities for 16 year olds came about through the need for intervention at specific transition stages in learning. It is aimed at young people in England coming to the end of compulsory education who are thought to be indifferent to further learning and who are not involved in any other activities during the Summer break.

Young people in this position are more likely to lose contact with education, employment and training and to be unemployed at age 21. The aim of the programme, whose projects are based entirely or predominantly on outdoor adventure activities, with a residential element, is to re-engage uncommitted young people so that they further their education and to enhance their personal and social skills. Objectives for young people are to: develop self esteem, develop confidence, become good team workers, develop leadership skills and to broaden their horizons.

Thirty-two organisations from all sectors, led pilots in 2000 offering some aspects of the scheme to 1,400 young people, using up to £1 million of DfES money. In 2001, 47 second-phase pilots operated, one within the boundaries of every Connexions service. Between 2002 – 2004, a three year national roll-out is planned; this will be funded by NOF under the generic title Activities for Young People. The Connexions Service National Unit will oversee the implementation.

Evaluation of the first phase of the programme involved project monitoring, a survey of participants and in-depth case studies of eight projects (Hutchinson *et al,* 2001). This revealed that the average project size in terms of young people attending was 50; the smallest was attended by 7 and the largest by 232 young people. The projects offered a range of activities including IT related activities, community and environmental projects, work experience, football coaching, music and drama activities.

Young people were recruited onto the programme in a number of different ways including direct mailing to young people identified by schools, by youth workers inviting those they were working with to attend, by local radio and newspaper advertising. The number who attended was fewer than expected; this was thought to be due to the short lead in period and problems setting up some of the partnership arrangements.

Key findings of the first evaluation revealed:

- A moderate but significant increase by the end of the programme in the number who said they wanted to attend school or college

- That for 41% of the young people, the programme had either a big impact or had completely changed what they intended to do

- That 45% thought that the programme had improved their group working, communication and problem solving skills (although a significant minority thought that their skill levels across various attributes had decreased at the end of the programme)

- That for 85% of the young people, the Summer activities programme had made them more determined to achieve future plans. These effects were also reported to last over time since they were still evident when young people were followed up by telephone later in the Autumn.

In terms of good practice, evaluation of the first pilots suggests that it is important for there to be clarity of expectations between young people, their families and those running the projects; that young people should be involved as much as it practical in the design of the programme and in having some responsibility for organising some element of the programme and that it is important to offer a range of activities which provide "something for everyone".

(2) Playing for Success – DfES initiative

Playing for Success is a national initiative established by the DfES in partnership with the FA Premier League, the Nationwide League and their clubs and the LEAs. The aim of the initiative is to raise educational standards, in particular in urban areas, through the creation of Study Support Centres in professional football clubs. The Centres are managed by experienced teachers and use the medium and environment of football to support work in literacy, numeracy and ICT; they also provide facilities for homework.

The programme has been particularly focused on underachieving young people in Years 6 to 9 and has proved to be extremely popular with pupils, parents and schools. Pupils volunteered to attend and were offered individual support, with a focus on them becoming more self-reliant and trying things out for themselves. Most pupils attended over 80% of the course and almost half attended all available sessions.

The evaluation findings are based on data obtained from questionnaires completed by 1,200 pupils, 450 parents and 70 teachers (Sharp *et al*, 2001). Pupils' attitudes were obtained at the beginning and end of their time at the Centre. The evaluation responses suggest that the football setting was attractive to all young people, irrespective of gender or ethnicity. The young people were felt to respond positively to what was on offer and that they also benefited from the opportunity to meet people and make new friends. In terms of educational achievement, substantial and significant progress in numeracy and in ICT skills were found.

(3) Youth Inclusion Programme (YIP) – Youth Justice Board

This programme seeks to reduce offending, truancy and exclusion in disadvantaged neighbourhoods by providing targeted assistance and support though a variety of activities to 13-16 year olds. In each of the selected areas (YOTS), YIP projects are required to work with a core group of 50 young people in this age group who are known to be at risk of offending, truancy or exclusion; they can work with a wider group of young people if they wish but the focus of assistance must be on the core 50.

The objectives of the YIP are to:

- Reduce arrest rates in the target group by 60 percent

- Reduce recorded crime in the area by 30 percent

- Achieve at least one third reduction in truancy and exclusions of the young people concerned by 2002

Each project receives £68, 500 from the Youth Justice Board for each year that they are fully operational, plus a further £6,500 per project is paid direct to local evaluators. In return, projects must match grant funding with minimum local (partnership) funding in cash or in-kind of £75,000 per full year.

YIP projects can be based on a wide range of interventions that are intended to be multi-focused or to tackle offending behaviour tendencies. What is offered will depend on local needs and circumstances, but in all cases, a variety of activities will be offered. Whilst it is intended that the activities on offer should be fun, the programme guide also notes that they must be underpinned by social, educational or diversionary objectives.

Possible interventions include: family link centres in schools, utilising their computer facilities, which may include language support for ethnic minority students, after school and holiday clubs; skill centres aimed at providing excluded young people with training and qualifications; mentoring; sports and other forms of recreation; environmental work such as clean-up projects and the development of recreation areas; arts work such as drama, film-making and graffiti art.

Each project is intended to build up to an average of 10 hours provision for each targeted young person per week, although projects can be flexible in this in that it is recognised that some young people may need more intensive assistance than others.

The Youth Inclusion Programme has recently been evaluated and there are now 70 operational projects, at various stages of maturity. Although the programme cannot be expected to show immediate dividends (since it aims to encourage a significant behaviour change in young people, to avoid offending behaviour), a recent interim evaluation report encouragingly shows that the programme is having a positive impact on its objectives with, for example a 30% reduction in arrests after a young person's engagement in the project, and falls in crime of between 14 and 32%, with the largest decreases being for burglary, theft and handling offences.

(4) Splash Summer Schemes

Another Youth Justice Board initiative, Summer holiday 'Splash' schemes were started in Summer 2000 in some of the most deprived estates in the country, with an aim of providing constructive activities for 13-17 year olds. In a similar vein to YIPs, the aim is diversionary and the activities on offer highly varied.

Splash projects often combine life and educational classes (eg, drugs awareness or sex education) with a range of recreational activities such as video making, team sports and drama.

Findings from the first year of the schemes suggested that they played an important role in reducing youth offending in the areas where they operated. According to figures released in a press release by the Youth Justice Board, (29/08/01) in areas where a Splash scheme ran, there was a 36% reduction in domestic burglary and an 18% reduction in 'youth crime'.

(5) NACRO crime prevention and diversionary projects – various funding bodies including the Department of Health (including the Opportunities for Volunteering Grant) and SRB in partnership with NACRO

NACRO, a national charity working to reduce crime, runs a variety of activity based projects for young people, often focused on disadvantaged areas of the country such as inner-city housing estates. The activities offered currently involve around 5, 000 young people and 350 volunteers across the country.

NACRO also provides outreach work for disaffected young people to help them develop their skills and to make decisions about their future training and employment options; school exclusion projects, which work to support reintegration back into school or to help young people into training or employment, and projects for young offenders, which may include anger management programmes or helping them to deal with drug misuse. NACRO is also heavily involved in a number of YIP programmes mentioned previously.

NACRO's activity based projects cover a wide range of activities, both leisure-based and more structured. Some are focused on specific groups of young people such as those at risk of drug misuse. Activities include: after-school holiday provision; football projects; residential experiences; art work; new technology.

Project examples

(i) DEAL (Drugs, Empowerment, Action, Learning) is one example of a NACRO diversionary project to prevent young people becoming involved in drug taking. It also offers help to those who are already involved to tackle their addiction. The aim of DEAL is to provide young people with challenging and engaging activities at little or no cost to them, and to help them to improve their self-confidence and relationships.

Set up in 1997, the age range catered for by DEAL is 8-19 years, and on average, the project works with around 200 young people each year. Approximately one quarter of these have an addictive drug habit. The project is funded by and runs on a partnership basis which includes the DH, SRB, NACRO, a local community association, a youth information and activities centre, a drug treatment day centre and the local health authority. The project employs four members of staff and relies heavily on adult volunteers from the local community; a wide range of arts, music and drama-based activities are offered.

(ii) Four Football Community Link Projects are currently in operation around the country. These projects use football as a way to increase young people's self-confidence and the channel their energies in a constructive way. The projects, wherein one paid staff member works with the local community to set up and run football clubs for young people aged up to 16, also aim to increase the skills and confidence of adult volunteers and to foster good community relations. The clubs provide affordable and accessible opportunities for football coaching and participation in local tournaments, regardless of skill or ability. Over 2, 000 young people and over 250 volunteers are now involved in these projects nationwide.

Evaluation of these projects has highlighted positive effects both in terms of young people's expressed views towards them and in a reduction in the numbers of offences and incidents of nuisance behaviour committed by young people in the areas where projects have been operating (NACRO, 2000).

(6) Integrated learning and care – Education Extra extended study support (initially DfES funded and now NOF)

The charity Education Extra currently runs a small number of schemes which aim to provide integrated care and learning provision or what is now termed 'extended study support' for 11-14 year olds. These operate after school and often use school premises to provide a wide range of activities, including play and leisure pursuits that the children and young people are free to choose. These include arts activities such as jewellery making, dancing and sports.

11 schools from across England and Wales participated in the original pilot projects that try to support the needs of the children and their parents who are typically working, and the schools. The projects aim to provide an environment which is as much like home as possible (the 'home base') and yet to also provide access to out of school learning and enrichment activities to support the school curriculum. The projects have paid great attention to how they provide activities for this older age group of school children who do not want to 'cared for' in the same way as younger children and who wish to take more responsibility for how they spend their time. As such, the projects consulted with the children and many of the activities now offered are in response to student suggestions.

The 11 projects supported by Education Extra have evolved in different ways to reflect local needs and interests; some have a main focus on pastoral care, others on active learning; some charge a small fee per session, whilst others are free; some are open to specific school year groups. Feedback from the participating pupils and school staff has been positive, with improvements in pupil self-esteem and confidence being noted.

Most recently, Education Extra has highlighted the importance of play provision within schools; it notes that in some areas, the school may be the only appropriate setting in which to provide positive play opportunities (Extra Special Issue 84, Summer 2001) and that "play can be a medium for raising achievement by engaging communities with children's learning".

The charity is currently developing a new project for refugee children using play and a further project where art will be a key component of what is offered. With regard to children's access to the arts, Education Extra has also been extensively involved in work to encourage more museums and galleries to work with schools (Alive with Learning – Study Support in museums and galleries, 2001). Evaluation of the pilot projects has reported positive results in terms of stimulating enthusiasm and creativity among the children who have participated.

(7) Other Arts Initiatives

(i) 'Making it Happen in Art' – Quality Protects/Department of Health funded initiative

Under the Quality Protects initiative, a team has been established to focus on leisure, culture and the arts in the lives of young people in public care. Based on short term programmes of activity, one of the first projects, the *Galleries programme* was piloted throughout the Summer 2001.

Across the country, a range of museums and galleries offered workshops with groups of young people. Different dimensions of art were covered including conventional and digital photography and working along artists and sculptors working in a range of different mediums.

This programme culminated in an exhibition of the art produced by the participants. Currently no evaluation data is available; the Department of Health is however working on guidance materials aimed at local authorities who may wish to provide such programmes in the future.

(ii) 'Arts in Pupil Referral Unit (PRUs') – charity supported projects

Since 1996, the Gulbenkian Foundation has supported a range of arts and drama projects based in a range of PRUs from across the country. Some of the support has taken the form of covering the costs of local dance companies or artists to allow them to offer workshops for the young people within the units.

The aim of such provision has been to encourage the wider adoption of arts-based programmes in such settings and to provide avenues through which to encourage young people to participate in activities and to enhance their self-confidence and motivation. Feedback from some of the participating PRUs indicates that participation in the arts activities brought generally positive results for the young people. For some, this meant better grades in their examinations than had been expected and improvements in students' skills, understanding and motivation

CASE STUDIES OF PLAY PROJECTS

(1) Children in Temporary Accommodation Play (TAP) Project, Sheffield

Established in 1998, the aim of the play project has been to provide a means of reducing stress within families living in temporary accommodation by providing play opportunities for children, and also to support them in developing a range of skills.

Often when children and families are homeless, a time when they are in greatest need of support, they have difficulty accessing mainstream services. This adds to the pressures of being homeless and can exacerbate the stress and ill-health they suffer. With regard to play, provision for homeless families (even down to basic provision of space) is the exception rather than the rule. In an attempt to try and improve this situation, the post of Homeless Children's Development Worker was created by the local authority with initial joint finance funding for three years.

To support the work, a joint planning group was initially set up, made up of the main partners of the project – the Housing Services Assessment Support Team; Sheffield Health; Social Services; Shelter's Homeless to Home project; South Yorkshire Housing Association; North British Housing Association; Young Children's Service Area Team, and the Community Recreation and Play team who managed the project.

Since early 1999, the TAP project has provided the following:

- The establishment of regular holiday playschemes on three housing sites, offering 5,866 play sessions to homeless children (with each session lasting up to 3 hours on each occasion).

- Several short term projects responding to particular needs such as parent and toddler groups; a library group; an after school club; Christmas parties and regular "Teddy Bears' Picnics", wherein parents and toddlers go out to various parks and call at a supermarket on the way back. These outings not only encourage parents to socialise but resolve some of the practical problems which face single parents carrying shopping and pushing prams to and from supermarkets some distance away.

Some initial findings from the pilot project revealed that homeless children present a range of specific needs which need to be carefully considered when planning provision. These include limited concentration spans; limited self-worth, an inability to recognise the value of routine and poor ability to cooperate. As a result, the work is stressful and challenging.

The project has been staffed by one full-time worker, assisted by casual workers from the Play and Recreation Team and many volunteers such as health visitors and education welfare officers giving freely of their time.

Further funding is now being sought, to allow the project to become a mainstream service and to enhance what is offered by the project in terms of the accommodation used for the play sessions and the numbers of full-time project workers. Play space at the three sites has generally been difficult to find – for example at one site, the play provision is based in two rooms shared with the health visitor and doctor; these are also used for laundry and occasional storage.

(2) Projects supported by Islington Play Association: the Finsbury Park Homeless Families Project and PALACE (Play and Learning Creative Education)

The Finsbury Park project is an example of an outreach play project. Established in 1999 with original funding from the SRB and the local Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP), the project first began work with the under 5s age group but quite quickly expanded this as it became apparent that the over 5s needed support too.

The project, which does not charge the families who use it, operates over 4 days per week, offering 2 hour sessions in a range of specific hostels. In the holidays, the project organises a range of schemes and trips out.

The project sessions are provided in the day-time for younger children and in the after school hours for children attending school. Spare communal spaces are used within the hostels (for example, disused dining rooms) which the project team decorate and attempt to make as child friendly as possible. The project will also work with families in accommodation where there is no space; here support is offered to link families into other play projects or to give advice on local play facilities.

Over the last year, the project has worked with over 200 children.

PALACE is a play project that works with children with disabilities, ranging from dyslexia through to severe cerebral palsy. PALACE caters for the age range 0-18 years, with most of the children and young people attending falling in the 13-14 years age band. Average attendance at any one time is between 15-20 young people.

Based in old day nursery premises, the project has been established for 11 years and was originally started by a group of parents experiencing difficulties accessing services for their children. It has been funded by Islington Play Association, the local EYDCP and a range of charitable funds over this time and is currently applying to the New Opportunities Fund for funding.

Parents pay £10 per annum membership which provides unlimited access to the project. Up until recently, the project was open three days a week; a recent increase in funding has allowed PALACE to now operate six days a week, from 10am –6pm. In addition, the project has recently started to offer some holiday schemes.

The project works with the children in a variety of ways, both individually, in groups and with families. Specific groups are provided for non-speaking children and those with complex needs. The overall aim is to work in a holistic way, which incorporates teaching, therapeutic play and play to enhance communication.

No longer parent run, but with an emphasis on being parent-led, the project employs a range of specialist staff on a sessional or part-time basis. These include a physiotherapist (19 hours per week), an osteopath (19 hours per week) a Shiatsu therapist (6 hours per week) and a music therapist .

(3) The Hip-Hop Scheme within the Hamara Family Project, Walthamstow

The Hamara Family Project has been established for twelve years and provides a range of services for disabled children and young people. The Project is part of the range of provision supported by Barnardo's London and South East Region. Currently the project is working with 182 young people aged between 0-19 years and their families. 70% of these are boys, which may reflect the high number of children with autism referred to the project (60 children – 33%). 53 of the children involved with Hamara are Asian, 43 are Black, 51 are White and 15 are from other backgrounds. The number of referrals received by the project this year reflects a 20% increase on last year.

Within the range of services offered by the Hamara Family project, a number of play based activities are offered. These include:

- An integrated play scheme during the school holidays as funding allows

- The Hip Hop scheme which works to promote the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream out of school activities (Hamara Integrated Play and Holiday Opportunities Project)

- A holiday club for young people of senior school age

The Hip Hop scheme works to assist children with disabilities to access and integrate into mainstream playschemes and to participate in activities they would not otherwise be able to attend. A key aim is to promote the inclusion of disabled children. The scheme builds upon previous playscheme provision offered by Hamara but with possibly a greater focus on inclusion in mainstream services than the previous project which utilised the facilities of a local special school.

Parents cover the costs of actually attending the mainstream playscheme, with Hamara providing a play worker to support the child for thirteen weeks. During this time, the service is reviewed to ensure that the child is happy and that any adaptions take place that will allow the child to stay there without support or with reduced support. This project is currently in the pilot phase. The response to date from parents, staff, children and some of the local out of school facilities, has been extremely positive. The recent securing of funding from the New Opportunities Fund means that Hip Hop will shortly expand to include providing support workers to allow some children to attend after-school clubs.

The holiday club is another recent development within the Hamara project. With funding from the Social Services Special Carers Grant, this offers secondary school aged children the opportunity to on outings with other children during the holidays.   Evaluation by Barnardo's indicates that the club has proved to be extremely successful with both young people and their parents.

Plans for the future include the building of a Children's Centre as a community resource for all children. This will include a sensory room, a soft play area and a 'safe' outside play area. A particular challenge facing the project workers is to forge links with adult services as more of the children currently attending the project move towards adulthood – Hamara has worked with many of families for over ten years, who therefore see Hamara as a significant part of their support network.

(4) The Building Bridges Project, supported by Camden Play Service

A number of play projects supported by Camden Play Service focus on children with specific needs. These include children with physical difficulties (the *Rollercoaster* project), children in temporary accommodation (the *TAP* project) and *Building Bridges*, which works to support children excluded from school.

Building Bridges, which has been established for three years, operates on three days a week from a voluntary sector play centre, offering sessions between 10am –2pm. The main age group catered for is 5-13 years, and depending on the needs of the children, the project sessions work with up to 7 children at a time. Some of the children have learning difficulties and challenging behaviour; all are referred to Building Bridges by the Local Education Authority (who is responsible for paying for the children's places within the project) with many also being known to social services and health agencies.

The project is staffed by a full-time co-ordinator, a teacher on a twice weekly basis and 4 project workers for the holiday provision. All of the other workers as employed on short term contracts as and when required, again depending on the level of needs of the children in attendance. The project offers what it describes as a "very structured" play programme since the workers have found that the children respond well to short, focused pieces of activity. A key aim is to use play as a means of helping children to learn to manage their own behaviour.

The Building Bridges staff also offer family work and general advice and support to parents (for example, advice on welfare benefits); in-school liaison and support to return and/or reintegrate children back into school and holiday schemes. The project has developed and expanded it play provision and work with excluded children in recent years. When it began, it offered a part-time curriculum alongside the local Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). When the PRU moved to full-time provision, Building Bridges moved to current form of play based sessional support.

The project has not been externally evaluated.

(5) The Kids and Co Group, Hollybush Family Centre Project, Hereford.

Hollybush Family Centre was set up in 1992 with funding from the local social services department, largely in response to the provisions set out in the 1989 Children Act. Offering a variety of groups and support services to families with young children, one of its approaches is to help parents who missed out on experiences of play as a child, to have a chance to play and in doing so, to learn how to play with and relate positively with their child. Throughout the week, the centre offers a range of more structured groups, alongside more informal drop-in sessions. Discovering the importance of play is a key theme of the work undertaken.

Located on a large council estate, the centre is based in a one floor building with a surrounding garden; inside, there is a soft play room, a messy room for craft activities and a ball pool donated by a local business.

Referral to the Hollybush Centre is by professionals, typically health visitors, GPs and social workers. The centre aims to support up to 150 families, both from urban and rural areas, and raises money from local charities for parents' activities.

The centre also runs a women's group to raise self-esteem, is developing work with single-parent fathers and offers intensive group work with parents who have learning difficulties, in order to help them be successful parents.

SECTION F: ONGOING RESEARCH AND UNPUBLISHED DATA

The Playwork Department at Leeds Metropolitan Department:

Recent studies have examined differences in play between different ethnic minority groups, for example, Christian and Hindu children and between children resident in the UK and their country of origin. Other research areas include play and traveller families and computer aided ways of enhancing play for children with disabilities. The team are shortly to publish work on good practice in playwork.

Contact details for further information: Steven Rennie, Leeds Metropolitan University

The Daycare Trust

Will be undertaking research into childcare for older children later this year.

Contact details: Megan Pacey, Policy Officer, email: mpacey@daycaretrust.org.uk

Department of Human Geography, Loughborough University

Currently examining children's use of the internet and cyberspace.

Contact details: Sarah Holloway

Department of Landscape, University of Sheffield

Currently undertaking research for the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions entitled ''Improving Urban Parks, Play Areas and Green Spaces'. The study, which will be completed in Spring 2002, seeks to identify innovative management of these spaces and who uses them or not, and why. Data collection is by means of focus groups including young people but not specifically children.

Contact details: Helen Woolley; email – landscape@sheffield.ac.uk

John McKendrick, School of Social Sciences, Glasgow Caledonian University

Currently consolidating a range of earlier works on commercial playgrounds. Also writing a book on children's geographies for older school-age children.

Contact details: John McKendrick, email – j.mckendrick@gcal.ac.uk

David Ball, School of Health, Biological and Environmental Sciences, Middlesex University.

Professor Ball has recently completed an extensive analysis of risk within outdoor playgrounds within the UK for the HSE. The research also reviews international research in risk factors. This report will be available shortly.

SECTION G: CONCLUSIONS

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY

The review of the importance of play for all children earlier in this report paints a picture of strong support for play in a number of different dimensions. Throughout a substantial body of literature, which examines in some depth the various theories of play, and which is drawn from a range of different disciplines, including child psychology and child psychotherapy, human geography, anthropology and studies of children's folklore, a range of benefits are set out. Traditionally these have focused on benefits to the individual child; more recently, the focus has been on benefits to society as a whole.

Running alongside this, at a practical level, the process of consultation undertaken by the New Policy Institute with a range of professionals working in play organisations and projects, children's charities and university departments, has indicated not only a strong belief in the value of play but also concern about some of the trends identified in the review. These include: restrictions on children's access to their local environments; the loss of free time; and, particularly for children with disabilities or from ethnic minority groups, shortages of appropriate play provision. From the case studies however, it is clear that there is considerable activity at the project level and that under a number of national policy initiatives, opportunities for play and recreation, albeit on a fairly structured basis, are emerging.

What remains problematic however, as the summaries at the end of each section of literature reviewed highlight, is that the *evidence* for the benefits of play is complex, often inconclusive and there are a number of areas where data is seriously lacking and research is needed.

With regard to the data on health for example, there is a lack of clarity between play, physical activity and sport. In education, as a number of the researchers themselves acknowledge, the effects of play are hard to prove, although teachers appear to value play and there is renewed interest in the positive effects of breaktime. There is also some emerging research on play and brain development. And from the point of view of the social benefits more generally of play provision, again the effects are hard to disentangle and there appear to be a number of trends quite clearly working against the provision of free play opportunities and a move towards more organised and supervised activities.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

If the value of play is to be more firmly rooted in the current policy environment, the findings of this review would suggest that action is needed in a number of areas:

(1) Building up the knowledge base, based on the established consensus of those working in the play field

The lack of research *evidence* should not lead to the value of play being diminished or dismissed – more that there needs to be more recognition of the complexities and subtleties of play. As such, it seems important that amongst those actually working or researching in the play field, efforts should be made to develop what is already known about the positive benefits of play into a more comprehensive and current knowledge base. As Coalter and Taylor note, "existing information and research is not widely known, even in the playwork profession".

(2) Evaluation of play projects

From the case studies identified during the review, it is apparent that there is valuable information which requires much wider dissemination than currently undertaken. As the introduction noted, part of the problem here appears to be the result of funding limitations. Addressing this deficit in evaluating projects would help to build up the knowledge base as just described.

(3) Further research

Many of the suggestions presented here pick up on recommendations made in earlier works such as those by Coalter and Taylor (2001). They are also based on a range of suggestions put forward by some of the individuals and organisations the New Policy Institute consulted with in undertaking this review.

There is a need for:

- Research which is more clearly defined and focused on play, including the views of teachers towards play as a learning medium

- Longitudinal data and data covering a wider geographic spread

- Research on the access to, and use of, play facilities by disabled children in particular from the perspective of their use of free time

- Research which clearly separates out the pre-school group from older children

- Research which looks at innovative ways of bringing care and free play together within the context of the overall expansion of out of school services

- Further research which looks at the environmental factors amenable to manipulation such as traffic speeds and urban layout

- Research from the parents' perspective in terms of what sort of play provision they want for their children

Caution is needed however in that given the subtleties and complexities of play as just outlined, attempts to quantify the benefits of play are likely to be unsuccessful. As such, it needs to be acknowledged that the sort of data likely to be of most use will be of a qualitative nature, and may focus on the user perspective. This in itself would be highly valuable in terms of helping the UK to make progress towards implementing Article 31 of the UN Convention – which as discussed earlier, remains an area of only limited success to date.

APPENDIX 1: DATABASE SEARCHES AND KEY WORDS

Databases searched: ILAM; NFER and NfER/CERUK; Institute of Child Health; CPC Information Service; Institute of Education; Library at the School of Education, University of Leicester; Action for Sick Children; London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; Regard (ESRC Research database).

Also manual and online searches of:

Key journals such as the British Medical Journal, Developmental Psychiatry, Childhood and Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry (1995 onwards), British Journal of Educational Studies (1995 onwards)

Research briefs and summaries internet listings of the DfES, Health Development Agency, ESRC; Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Nuffield Foundation; PSSRU at Kent; World Health Organisation; ROSPA; Child Accident Prevention Trust; Disability Rights Commission

With regard to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a number of internet sites were searched including the Childwatch International Research Network (www.childwatch.uio.no).

Email contacts were also made via number of specialist play organisations, for example Fairplay, notifying their members of the review and inviting information of any relevant data sources.

Key words:

CHILDREN - children and play; school-age children and play; children and participation; children's rights; children and social inclusion; children and leisure; children and social learning; children's cognitive development; children and access to services; children's views on play; children's learning; bullying; friendships; activities; play and children's health; children's culture; children and outdoor activities; children's space.

PLAY – play locations; theories of play; trends in play; play and safety; playgrounds; importance of play; play and environmental influences; play initiatives; play projects; play planning; play and the UN Convention; play and social inclusion; play and disabled children; play and children from ethnic minority groups; play and mental health.

EDUCATION: play and school; play and the curriculum; play and the National Curriculum; teachers' views towards play; play and learning; problems with playtime.

APPENDIX 2: STUDY METHODOLOGIES

Harland et al (NfER 2000) Arts Education in Secondary Schools: Effects and Effectiveness

Evidence for the project was collected through in-depth case studies of arts education in 5 secondary schools; secondary analysis of data from another NfER project; a survey of Year 11 pupils and schools; interviews with employers and employees. The schools selected had reputations for good practice in the provision of arts education and reflected a variety of settings and institutions (e,g urban and rural, different sizes and different socio-economic contexts).

The data was collected over three phases, 1997, 1998 and 1999. Data was collected from two longitudinal cohorts of pupils (identified by teachers as making good progress in an area of the arts), teachers and education management staff. Data was also collected via video and observation of arts activities. Across the three phases, a total of 219 interviews (up to three per pupil) were conducted. One limitation noted by the researchers about this phase of the project was that the sample was heavily skewed in terms of gender, with boys amounting to only 30% of the sample. This was partly due to the inclusion of an all-girl school in the sample, but also because teachers tended to nominate more girls than boys.

The survey of Year 11 pupils was designed to examine the proposition that studying or engaging in the arts has a positive effect on general academic achievement in GCSEs. The survey involved a pupil questionnaire exploring a wide range of issues to do with their views towards and participation in the arts. 22 schools out of an initial sample of 40 participated in the study, with 2,269 questionnaires being completed. Overall, the researchers note that despite a slight bias towards girls, the sample achieved broad representation in terms of gender, ethnicity and social class; it was drawn from a random sample of schools and contained a valuable mixture of different schools and teaching approaches therein.

Huttenmoser and Degen-Zimmermann (1995) Lebensraume fur Kinder

Study design included telephone interview of all parents of 5 year old children in the city of Zurich (1729), a written questionnaire completed by 926 parents and an in-depth study of 20 families, 10 where children could play freely near their home and 10 who could not.

Limitations of the study appear to be the small sample size and the possibilities of factors other than the availability of safe play provision outside the home affecting the results – for example, differences in television viewing and the ability of the mother to speak German which would be likely to influence the degree of integration of the family into their neighbourhood.

Keating et al (2000) Well, I've Not Done Any Work Today. I Don't Know Why I Came to School. Perceptions of Play in the Reception Class

Study sample was based on 10 primary schools in the north-west of England. These were selected at random, but avoided church-funded/aided schools. Focus on what the research team identified as the five major stake-holders in the Reception Class – the headteacher, the reception class teacher, the classroom assistant, the parent and the child.

The data was gathered via semi-structured, informal, individual interviews. These were recorded and transcribed. Supplementary notes were made as required.

Five researchers undertook the interviews and care was taken to ensure that the same issues were raised. To allow for the fact that the interviews were informal and interactive, it was agreed that the researchers would act as a guide during the interview to ensure some continuity between the interviews.

McKendrick et al (2000) Enabling Play or sustaining exclusion? Commercial Playgrounds and disabled children

Paper is based on findings from the ESRC Research Project *The Business of Children's Play*. The aim was to review the commercial provision of playspace for children aged between 5 and 12 in the UK. The study was based on Greater Manchester and used a multi-method, multi-stage research design involving questionnaires to review patterns of participation and family leisure preferences. Two surveys were conducted, one with families using commercial playgrounds and one with parents of school children from four schools in Manchester selected to reflect different economic areas of the city and different educational needs. In total, 872 families were surveyed. In addition, the study involved interviews with 30 families, observational studies of children at play, case studies and whole family interviews.

The methods were used to build up a detailed picture of family views towards the use of commercial playgrounds and what they provide. A particular strength of the study appears to be the gathering of data from different perspectives, including those of children themselves and how these may differ from their parents/carers.

Mulverhill et al (2000) A qualitative study investigating the views of primary-age children and parents on physical activity

Study was based on six sites across England, three of which were urban and three rural/suburban areas. The study aim was to examine the factors influencing children's involvement in physical activity. 60 primary school children aged between 5 and 11 years took part in paired interviews and 38 parents were interviewed in groups. The schools were selected to reflect socio-economic diversity and differences in ethnic groups within the school population.

The approach adopted in the study was qualitative and exploratory, with the use of open-ended questions to encourage respondents to exert an influence over the choice of issues covered and to discuss their understandings of physical activity in an informal and interactive manner. A version of the 'draw and say' technique was used with the children on the basis that drawing is an activity which this age group feel comfortable with and provides a starting point for discussion.

The researchers acknowledge that "as a result of the purposive sampling procedures employed, and the exploratory nature of the investigation, it is not appropriate to offer a record of the frequency with which views were expressed or to make claims about the typicality for an age groups as a whole". Instead the aim was to identify the range of views, recurrent themes and some of the issues which may arise out of children's views towards involvement in physical activity. Some bias may also have resulted form the use of teachers to select the children for interview – teachers may have been encouraged to select active children by virtue of the project's stated interest.

Petrie et al (2000) Out of School Lives, Out of School Services

This qualitative study incorporated a variety of research methods, with an aim to provide analysis on families' uses of out-of-school services. A range of specific user groups were identified via a range of service providers and organisations selected on the basis of information supplied by local authorities and others working in the field.

Services were selected to reflect the user groups under consideration, namely young people aged 10-13 (15 services/39 families studied); disabled children (6 services, 18 families studied); children of African/African-Caribbean background (6 services/18 families studied) and children of Asian background (6 services/18 families studied).

The services selected were from the private, public and voluntary sectors. For each, regular visits were made for the purposes of observation and interviews with staff and with users. The study incorporated ethnographic fieldwork, which involved extensive and in-depth visits which covered young peoples' activities, interactions between staff and young people, between older and younger service users and any problems experienced by staff and children. Interviews varied from full-length semi-structured interviews through to a series of more brief conversations, depending on the abilities of the children to communicate. A thematic analysis of the data obtained examined the reasons given for using services and satisfaction with them.

The study also included a telephone survey of three London boroughs. A stratified random sample of 27 services was obtained, representing different forms of organisation. Basic background data about the service was obtained from short interviews with staff on site. Telephone interviews were conducted with a sample of 185 parents, randomly selected, and again explored their use of a particular service and their satisfaction with it.

Two identified weaknesses of the study noted in the appendix are that the disabled children from whom the sample was drawn, were mostly referred and paid for by social services, and overly-represent the severely disabled end of the spectrum of disability. Secondly, that whilst the telephone survey achieved a 69% response rate, economically disadvantaged parents may be under-represented in that 12% of those sampled did not have a telephone or their telephone line was dead when the researchers attempted to contact them.

Robson, S. (1993) "Best of all I like Choosing Time" Talking with children about play and work

Study based on three primary and nursery school, two in suburban areas and one in an urban, inner-city area. The ages of the children studied ranged from 4.6- 5.6 years and all had been in school for at least one term prior to the study.

In all three schools, the researcher spent time with the children during a variety of activities. This was followed by tape-recorded discussions in a quiet area, with 24 children either individually or in groups of 2 or 3 (which the children selected on the basis of their friendships). These covered a range of areas and were essentially steered by the children.

Sherman, A. (1997) Five Year Olds' Perceptions of Why We Go to School

Study involved a series of visits and interviews with five schools in a large city area.

Fifty children from five county council reception/year one classes participated. Data was collected face-to-face via interviews that generally took place after a period of familiarisation in the classrooms.

The familiarisation process took the form of weekly visits to each of the schools for ten weeks before the interviews began. During the visits, the researchers participated in all classroom activities, sometimes working in small groups or individually. A journal was kept of these visits.

The interviews with the children were conducted as informal conversations. An outline questionnaire of twenty questions was used to stimulate conversation with each child.

Wheway, R. and Millward, A. (1997) Child's Play

Study focused on 12 housing estates built between the 1890s and 1990s and involved over 3,500 observations of children aged under 18 made between the hours of 9.30am and 8pm. In addition, 236 children and 82 parents were interviewed using a standard questionnaire format. In addition, information was also gathered from estate managers, local planners and youth workers.

The research design, a combination of observations and interviews, deliberately followed closely that used in an earlier Department of the Environment Study (DoE 1973) in order to allow some comparisons over time to be made. It should be noted however that the DoE study focused on 15 relatively modern housing estates which reflected the thrust of housing policy at the time – more recent housing trends have been to renew older stock and to create smaller estates.

Woods, E. (1999) The impact of the National Curriculum on play in reception classes

Study based on nine teachers drawn from a novice-expert range, from a newly qualified teacher to one with 20 years' experience. The research design incorporated a variety of methods, including narrative accounts, semi-structured interviews, teacher group meetings and video sessions of play. Whilst clearly a small sample, the study provides comprehensive and in-depth data from a group of teaching professionals with a wide span of experience. Woods also argues that "research that represents teachers' voices can present valuable insights into the situated nature of their knowledge about teaching and learning in relation to educational policy".

Von Kries et al (1998) Road injuries in school age children

Study examined all school age children between 6 and 14 in Dusseldorf (population of 570 000O who had suffered a road injury between January 1993 and March 1995. Study was a case control design with controls matched by age and sex. Criteria for inclusion were residence in Dusseldorf and sustaining an injury within 500 metres of home. Random sample of 174 children were selected for interview.

Study bias was minimised by checking data with national figures. Study limitations noted included an inability to control for socio-economic variables; study also unable to account for variations in traffic volume.

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