

Child's play? Does 'subject' learning have a role in pretend play?

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Much research emphasises the holistic and 'free' nature of young children's play, yet pressure on early years professionals increasingly results in play that is 'planned' to provide evidence of adults' goals, contributing to the 'schoolification' of early childhood. Should play in educational settings be utilised by adults as a vehicle for academic skill development? This paper addresses two questions:

- Can young children's *impromptu* pretend play provide opportunities for them to develop early concepts of mathematics and writing?
- What are the implications for children's play?

Qualitative data comprising written documentation of pretend play and visual representations from seven children aged 3-4 years, were collected in an inner-city nursery for a larger longitudinal ethnographic study. Analysis is within an interpretive paradigm supported by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software.

The research draws on Vygotsky's perspective of the social and cultural nature of play and symbol use, and relationships between spontaneous and scientific concepts in childhood: mathematical thinking and literacies are understood to begin through participation in meaningful communicative cultural practices.

The findings show that where adults value and understand pretend play and meaning making, children will establish spontaneous concepts that provide firm foundations for subsequent 'scientific' concepts of school. Children's understandings are exhibited not through narrow curriculum targets, but through their interests and desire to communicate their thinking within their play narratives. Whilst pretend play can provide meaningful *locations* of semiotic and 'subject' explorations, this paper¹ argues that its ownership should rest with the children.
