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Time to Play

The development of inter-culturally sensitive approaches to creative play in children's centres serving predominantly Muslim communities

A summary of the action research project

'Citizens need to be multi-literate in ways that not only allow them access to new information and media-based technologies, but also enable them to be border crossers capable of engaging, learning from, understanding and being tolerant and responsible to matters of difference and otherness.' (Giroux, 2005)

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Time to Play

The *Time to Play* project aimed to explore how to develop creative play with young children and their mothers that might be appropriate in predominantly Muslim communities, arriving at understandings of the mothers' own views, current practices and values for their children. Four practitioners were each involved in a different children's centre, in Birmingham, Bristol, Oxford and Southampton, to foster creative arts activities and music. The project practitioners were made up of performance artists with backgrounds in music, story-telling and theatre. Through action research Time to Play explored the dilemmas, challenges and possibilities that this work presented, with practical, culturally sensitive approaches that could be used by practitioners more widely.

Peeple connection

Time to Play was set up under the auspices of Peeple (then known as PEEP: Parents Early Education Partnership) because its aims were in tune with the principles and aspirations of Peeple, and because of the potential for dissemination of emergent issues throughout the country via its professional development programme. There was therefore an established model of working with parents with which the Time to Play practitioners could interact if they chose to do so, and a resource centre for books, rhymes and games that reflected a variety of languages and cultures.

Peeple aims to contribute towards a significant improvement in educational attainment by whole communities of children, from their birth, by working with parents and carers (see www.peeple.org.uk). Through its *Learning Together* Programme it seeks to build on and enhance what parents already know about and can do with their children as their first educators and so support their early learning. In this spirit of starting with what parents already do, Peeple adopts the ORIM model (Hannon, 1995) as a framework in its intervention programmes. This focuses on the opportunities parents can provide for learning from everyday life experiences, the recognition they can give of their children's efforts, the interaction through being and doing things together, and the modelling of behaviours that can underpin learning. During Peep sessions practitioners offer core activities with families, focused on discussion with parents about an aspect of child development, along with sharing songs and rhymes, practical activities, and books and stories.

Aims of the project

Two core aims of the project were to:

1 Introduce creative play activities that are accessible and considered valuable by the mothers and children, and that will form a bridge between home activities and the Early Years Foundation Stage.

2 Empower the mothers and young children by generating forms of appropriate support.

Method

The project was an action research project carried out in three phases:

Phase 1 Interviews with 86 mothers across the four areas, in the mother's preferred language. The interviews asked about cultural and religious values in relation to play and music, and the mothers' hopes and expectations for their children on entering pre-school education. The knowledge from this fed into planning the practice in each of the four urban children's centres involved in the project. Two settings held 'Stay and play' sessions and two developed specially formed groups for the purpose of the project.

Phase 2 Play activities were discussed and explored with the parents involved and 20 sessions were held in each of the four locations. The Time to Play practitioners met for regular reflection.

Phase 3 Dissemination to the network of Peep practitioners via workshops, training, conference papers and information on the Peeple website, including a final report.

Findings

Almost half the mothers came from Pakistan, and a quarter from Somalia. The remainder were from a number of other countries, including England, and countries in the Middle East and the Indian Sub Continent. Half the mothers spoke Somali or

Punjabi; Urdu and Pushtu were also well represented, the remainder speaking languages from the areas mentioned above.

Qualifications held by the mothers were split fairly evenly into a third with no qualifications, a third with secondary school qualifications, and a third with further or higher educational qualifications.

Creative Play

There did not seem to be a correlation between whether the child was engaged in creative play and the mother's educational background, qualifications or social class. The age of the mother appeared to be more significant: only 17% of mothers under the age of 25 had children who engaged in creative play, compared to 43% of mothers over that age. The age of the child was not a significant factor; nor whether there were siblings.

The women were asked an open-ended question about whether and why play was important for their child. Forty-six per cent felt that play was important for learning and/or development. Some also mentioned play's connection with enjoyment, language and confidence.

Creative arts and music and mothers' views

A variety of views on music and dance were expressed by families during the project, and cultural resonances discovered.

The dholak, a barrel-shaped drum which can be struck at both ends, is typically played by women at celebrations and for their own entertainment. This instrument carries positive meanings. Zingar, wooden instruments with small jingles, were also introduced in one setting by chance, and were taken up and played by women with dance-style movements that were familiar to them. These represented some of the 'connecting points' that the project sought.

There were some issues around whether it is appropriate for children to dance and perform music. Most parents felt it was acceptable for young children, though often less so as they got older, particularly for girls. The majority of mothers were concerned that songs sung with children should not have words associated with other religions or with love.

It emerged that in some cultures women who dance and make music are felt to lack moral standing, but for some Muslims, musicians and singers were respected for maintaining traditions. The Time to Play team learnt, increasingly, that there are no hard and fast rules; that while some families adhere to firm restrictions, others may not. What practitioners needed to do was to be alert and sensitive to the possibility of anxiety around certain activities, without making assumptions.

Mothers' age and children's engagement in creative play

Discussions about the role of women at home indicated that many were expected to fulfil busy domestic tasks and were involved in caring for extended family members, often combined with looking after infants. This was especially true for young mothers. It is possible that older mothers who already had other children also had experience of using the children's centre services, and could see them as a source for ideas and educational activities, and were more familiar with play resources in settings than younger less experienced mothers.

The perceived importance of play for learning

The interviews took place within settings and it is possible that this might have influenced mothers to make links between play and their children's learning and development. Their responses were used as the starting point for dialogue about what they had valued in their own play as children, their memories around relations and family and home contexts. It was then possible to centre on what was important to them to explore with their children playfully. Activities aimed at valuing their experiences were then developed which in turn led to activities for mothers and children to engage in together.

Implications for practice

The findings suggest that projects designed to work in a more culturally responsive way may require professionals to work flexibly in terms of models of practice; the balance between being family centred and curriculum centred; and their role as mediator rather than 'expert'.

Time to Talk

Finding out about the geographical, cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds of the families was important for understanding parents' different values, priorities and expectations. Drawing on contributions from parents and children engaged and encouraged them, and suggests that session content should not be completely pre-determined.

Language

With the mixture of languages, ways had to be found to bridge understandings – such as through either parent or practitioner demonstrating the order and skill of playing five-stones, the peep-o games with scarves and saris, the making of name cards, playing and moving to the drum, or using unfixed materials. When possible they also worked closely with a parent or worker who could translate. There were no identified goals for the activities themselves. They were open ended and fluid, seeking to understand what was meaningful in terms of creative play for both mother and child.

On-going reflection and supervision

For all the project team this was 'new territory' outside their familiar areas of music, young children's learning, educational practice and so on. They discussed feeling nervous: of revealing some ideas or attitudes held deep-down and unawares that might be unwittingly offensive; and of showing ignorance of cultural and social issues that they felt they ought to know about. The project repeatedly made practitioners more aware of their own racial, religious, gender and class identities. As Bradley (2007) has suggested, a coded language evades talk about race and difference; the avoidance of such talk, being difference-blind, actually perpetuates disparities by silencing the language needed for description and analysis. The starting point is to address our fears, to 'ask provocative questions, navigate predictable debates', and 'talk more about talking'.

Seminars, mentoring and supervision may help to support practitioners in what can be personally demanding work when families who have moved to the UK share direct experiences of conflict and unrest. This may involve rethinking ideas around 'delivery', 'training' and 'expertise' in order to create professional times and spaces for dialogue, as well as sign-posting and support for families.

Practical approaches

An outsider looking on might see little difference between the activities used during the project and those in many children's centre stay-and-play sessions. Parents and children were sometimes occupied in parallel in the same activity, sometimes following completely different pursuits, and sometimes cooperating and working out a problem together, such as where to stick the hair on the paper dolly, or how deep to press the hole in the clay. What emerged as important was to offer activities after finding out what was meaningful to the families, and to incorporate materials that offered flexibility through their potential for transformation. Through the shared creative experiences in this project, parents and practitioners came to know each other over time and differences could be explored. This process led to practitioners being reflective about their own experiences and motives.

Activities were planned with the child and parent together in mind. Planning in this context meant starting with thinking about where a mother might have travelled from, how long she might have been in the locality and what she knew her child liked to play with. Activities offered could act as starting points for exploring some of these things if the opportunity arose.

1 Talking about play: with dolls, fruit, dough and clay

Sharing the mothers' memories of their own play as children led to making dolls using fabric, wool, paper plates and wooden spoons. This led on to discussion about traditional celebrations, relationships and feelings associated with being distant from close and extended family. It also enabled discussion around the differences in family life in their cultures.

Food was considered by families to be too valuable to use for play. Self-hardening clay was popular with both parents and children, who made and decorated small objects such as pots, lamps and boats together. Different views about using dough or paint at home emerged; some mothers felt constrained by the need to keep a clean home. The children's centre offered an important resource for the children to play and learn, and Time to Play an opportunity to be expressive and sociable with others who might share similar religious beliefs, but have very varied views.

2 Sharing stories and songs

Sharing stories passed down from generation to generation in the parents' own language, and translations of traditional stories in English picture books was an activity the parents valued. They commented on how happy their children were during these activities, and that it linked to customs of families gathering to hear stories. Within this context, those who had fled areas of conflict felt able to tell their own stories to the group.

Practitioners encouraged the mothers to make homemade picture books with photographs of children's favourite toys and interests. Women who would struggle to read or write English and who had only rudimentary schooling could sit alongside others with a university education, talking together and representing their ideas through the picture books. The importance of names could be affirmed and mothers could be prompted to talk to the practitioner about the children's preferences around play.

In one group the mothers made a 'song cloth' with a plain cotton sheet and fabric pens after sharing songs from their childhood. This became a medium for self-expression to represent a mixture of traditional songs, stories and rhymes in a rich variety of words, pictures, languages, and mehndi. This helped to cross language barriers and brought back memories of the contexts of the singing.

3 Making and playing instruments: drums

In some traditional celebrations within Muslim, Sikh and Hindu culture it customary for women to play drums (eg the dholak mentioned earlier). Religious and secular songs were shared in the groups through a mother, a setting worker or the practitioner drumming. This enabled different people to take the role of cultural mediator and allowed those around them to feel empowered.

In one setting a careful negotiation was necessary to help staff understand the aims of the project, that it might be meaningful to have an adult-led activity in which parents made drums, within a free play session.

Percussion instruments were also used by practitioners experienced in playing and singing in response to children's gestures, vocal play and sound play. These practitioner responses provided an expressive role model for children, for parents and for setting practitioners; a playful partner; a responder to child-initiated ways of making sounds.

4 Making a comfortable space: fabric and furnishings

In all settings the room available for the project was designed for multi-purpose use. It was up to the individual lead practitioner to negotiate use of space, furniture and room layout. In time the mothers tended to take more responsibility for arranging the room comfortably with colourful fabrics, rugs and cushions for floor activities. A cloth was used to make a story tent, and a Somali rug brought in from home became a story mat. Links could be made between provision in the setting and sharing resources from home.

5 Recognising names and places

Names were important both for allowing dignity and for practical reasons in managing activities in which names could be used. As parents entered, a setting worker wrote the child's and parent's name on a sticky label and asked how they were pronounced. This emphasis on getting the sound and intonation of a name correct affirms parent's and child's identity, establishes relationship, and affords respect.

Activities centred on names, such as decorating name cards with different colours, textures,

henna, or glitter led to conversation about meanings and origins of names, reasons for choice and members of extended families.
Activities around world maps enabled talk about journeys and places of origin. Experiences of conflict zones and travelling across the world with small children were part of the historical background to some of the mothers' lives, together with the sense of powerlessness and loss. These political and social issues could not be ignored; they were part of the whole picture and reason for their present situations.

6 Games with jacks and five-stones

Simple traditional games around throwing and catching small stones which are played all over the world were moments for bridging cultures and languages, past and present, home and setting. They can be used to draw in new members of a group because no verbal communication is needed and it is a way of sharing skills. It is a way of adults modelling play for the children, playing a game which develops manual skills and hand eye coordination, and also brings adults and children together at the same level (the ground!). It is a game parents can teach their children with a confidence brought by familiarity, so affirming themselves as parents in contrast to being de-skilled by the more complex expensive toys and expectations of an unfamiliar culture.

Dissemination and Development

(phase 3)

Dr Susan Young and Dr Alison Street, the lead researchers on the Time to Play project, presented a paper on Time to Play at the MERYC Conference (the European Network of Music Educators and Researchers of Young Children).

Alison Street and Nuzhat Abbas (the Time to Play/ Peep practitioner in Oxford and well-known Pakistani poet and singer), have continued to work with South Asian families, building on their Time to Play experience. This has resulted in a CD/ songbook of rhymes, songs and lullabies (loris): S*inging Together in Urdu and Punjabi.* There is a spoken and written introduction, in English, Urdu and Punjabi, about how singing with babies supports the development of communication and language. This contributes to a wider campaign to encourage families to recognise the value of their mother tongue in both language development and cultural terms.

Alison and Nuzhat also developed *Working with South Asian Families:* a one-day training course for practitioners exploring ways of engaging and supporting South Asian families to learn together, using songs, stories and practical activities and incorporating families' language and cultural identities.

Further information on the conference paper, a longer research report, the CD/songbook and training can be found on the Peeple website.

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With thanks to all the families, staff and practitioners involved in extending our shared understandings.

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