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Unbalanced and unbalancing acts in the Early Years Foundation Stage: a critical discourse analysis of policy-led evidence on teaching and play from the Office for Standards in Education in England (Ofsted).

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical analysis of a report by the Office for Standards in Education in England (Ofsted, 2015), based on a survey of practitioners' perspectives of play, focusing on children age 2-5 years in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England. The report, 'Teaching and play in the early years - a balancing act? A good practice survey to explore perceptions of teaching and play in the early years' www.gov.uk/government/organisations/Ofsted, gathered evidence to address the 'recurring myth' that teaching and play are disconnected endeavours in the early years. Critical discourse and critical policy analysis are used to interrogate this report alongside interrelated texts, the socio-political context of production, the methods used to define policy versions of 'good practice' in play, and the resulting power effects within early childhood education (ECE). It is argued that this report exemplifies how the remit of Ofsted has extended to provide policy-led evidence that is based on the construction of 'problems' of practice, and the proposed solutions. The Ofsted version of teaching and play relies on circular discourses that reinforce the government's standards and accountability agendas. This analysis reveals the extension from Ofsted's remit of inspection, to a mandate for defining 'quality' and 'good' practice. These actions, relationships and processes constitute the 'meaning-laden architectures' (Fairclough et al, 2004) that connect discourse and power. Using the metaphor of a kaleidoscope, it is proposed that 'Teaching and Play', and related reports, represent unbalanced and unbalancing acts in which policy-led evidence, based on flawed and biased 'research', exerts power effects for children, families and practitioners.

1. Introduction

I use the metaphor of a kaleidoscope to conceptualise the complex processes of policy making, and the relationship between policy, research, theory and practice (praxis) in ECE. A kaleidoscope is a tube that encloses fragments of glass or other materials, and small mirrors, and directs one's eye, or gaze to what the kaleidoscope produces with its constituent parts. When the tube is rotated, the fragments move and produce new patterns that are reflected by the mirrors, which both refract and enhance the image. Small movements produce immediate changes, and the patterns are infinitely variable. Extending this metaphor, I understand early childhood education as many kaleidoscopes consisting of intersecting elements that can be split in different ways. How these elements are split determines what is refracted and mirrored in social and education policy, professional knowledge, and in wider discourses regarding equity, diversities and social justice. For example, 'disadvantaged children and families' have been the focus for funding and policy attention to ameliorate inequalities in educational attainment. Accordingly, ECE has become a site through which improvements in children's life chances should be kick-started, and subsequently evidenced by their outcomes on transition to compulsory education at age five.

I argue that the metaphor of the kaleidoscope serves both to focus and constrain the gaze of the researcher – the image of the tube signifies a closed system, where the mirrors refract and reflect what is there. Following a presentation where I used this metaphor, a doctoral student suggested an alternative interpretation. The presentation evoked childhood memories of making his own kaleidoscopes, where he experimented with everyday materials in his own environment to see what would happen. His actions produced different effects, and reflected the qualities of play and playfulness – stepping in and out of the system, making choices and decisions, being in 'what if' and 'as if' modes of exploration and experimentation in a material

context, finding out the effects of one's own actions – what can be created and produced through play, and what play creates and produces. From this perspective, I propose that the kaleidoscope can also be a metaphor for complexity, one that refracts and reflects different onto-epistemological and ethical concerns, and takes account of cultures and contexts, as well as the diversities of people's life worlds, experiences and identities. This interpretation positions practitioners as having agency that is rooted in professional knowledge, but at the same time draws attention to the policy discourses that are at work in ECE, and their power effects.

A review of research in the UK (www.bera.ac.uk, 2016) notes that ECE has been a relative latecomer to the intensification of education policies, and that much research expresses concerns with their effects and impact. Although Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own frameworks, a consistent theme in the review is that ECE is being pulled in different directions. The early childhood community (including advocacy groups and organisations, trade unions, academics and practitioners) has attempted to exert 'ground-up' and insider perspectives, drawing on underpinning ECE traditions, values and principles that have evolved over time, and contemporary research. However, in common with international trends, governments exert varying degrees of 'top-down' pressures on the purposes of ECE, what children should learn, what forms of pedagogy are recommended, what goals and outcomes are expected and valued, and how assessment should be carried out. ECE practitioners are, therefore, caught between different discourses: on the one hand policies appear to devolve responsibility for professional agency, but on the other hand, there are centralised 'command and control' policy levers and drivers which privilege the accountability and audit culture. For example, in the USA, Brown et al (2015) discuss the 'strange coupling of power' that exists between ECE and contemporary neoliberal policy-making, and problematize the 'subtle coercion of these neoliberal reforms and how they can limit and/or redefine the space in which teachers prepare children for kindergarten' (2015: p.148). Similarly, McMillan and McConnell (2015) use Critical Policy Analysis to examine ECE policies in Northern Ireland, and their alignment with core objectives of raising

standards and reducing educational underachievement. Their analysis reveals tensions between the core values of the ECE practitioner community, and the potential for slippage between the core aims of the policies and their implementation. Thus the policy kaleidoscope may not align with the praxis kaleidoscope, which demands attention to policy as an area of research in its own right. It is perhaps inevitable that play has been drawn into the wider policy arena because of its central role in ECE. The following section summarises some of the key debates about play, and its complicated place within reform movements.

2. Play in ECE policy frameworks

Play is considered to be the foundation for learning and development in early childhood. International research aims to understand play for its own sake, and how play contributes to learning and development across developmental domains and curriculum areas. However, situating play within contemporary ECE policy frameworks remains an area of debate because there are shared assumptions that play must contribute to the intended learning outcomes or goals (Fesseha and Pyle, 2016; Hunter and Walsh, 2014). As a result, play is also caught between different discourses such as degrees of freedom and structure, child-initiated and adult-led play, the role of adults and the challenges of play-based pedagogy, and identifying pre-defined learning outcomes. There are also cultural-historical factors in implementing play within different systems, as documented by Cheng Pui-Wah, Reunamo, Cooper, Liu and Vong (2015) in Hong Kong, and Hedges, Peterson and Wajskop (2018) in New Zealand, Ontario and Brazil. International research on play and pedagogy in ECE (Brooker, Blaise and Edwards, 2014; Fleer, 2015) indicates that integrated approaches can sustain freely-chosen and child-initiated play alongside playful approaches to learning and teaching that are adult-led. Wood (2014) expresses integration as three pedagogical modes:

Mode A – Child initiated and freely-chosen play that is led and managed by children according to their interests and inquiries.

Mode B –Adult-guided play in which adults are responsive to children's actions and interactions, and build on their interests and inquiries.
Mode C – Adult-led activities that relate directly to the intended learning outcomes in the curriculum, with little choice and flexibility for children.

Wood (2014) argues that these three modes represent a continuum of activities, with children moving flexibly between modes, and practitioners using observation and documentation to inform their practice. This conceptualization is consistent with research that foregrounds how children's interests are connected to their deep inquiries and funds of knowledge, and reflect curriculum-related content knowledge that can inform teachers' planning and provision (Chesworth, 2016; Hedges and Cooper, 2016; Hill and Wood, 2019).

In contrast, from a UK policy perspective, Wood (2015) has argued that play has been captured by policy discourses that seek to harness its benefits but at the same time influence what forms of play are desirable, and the learning outcomes that play must produce. The narrowing and capture of play within ECE policies is not confined to the UK. Hedges, Peterson and Wajskop (2018) used Wood's (2014) three pedagogical modes to conduct a comparative analysis of how play is understood within ECE frameworks in New Zealand, Ontario and Brazil. Their analysis concludes that shifts in policy are moving towards technicist and didactic uses of play, which includes more adult intervention in play, as well as in planning the learning environment and activities. They argue that there is a dislocation between Mode C, and Modes A and B that undervalues the social-pedagogic and relational qualities that are valued in ECE practice. Similar tensions can be seen in the ECE context in England, where the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Department for Education, 2017) (birth to five) sets the standards for learning, development and care, and shapes many aspects of provision for children, families and practitioners.

3. The ECE policy context in England

The EYFS is consistent with international trends to improve the quality and effectiveness of provision for young children and their families, and represents the intensification of direct government involvement in matters of learning and development, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The EYFS (2017) states that

> Each area of learning must be implemented through planned and purposeful play, and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity... There is an ongoing judgement to be made about the balance between activities led by children, and activities led or guided by adults. (para 1.8, p. 9)

A wide range of reports, government-funded research and commissioned research reviews informed the development of the EYFS, and constitute the 'meaning-laden architectures' (Fairclough et al, 2004) in ECE. The EYFS specifies the learning and development goals, assessment, safeguarding, provision for children with disabilities and additional needs, and the role of Ofsted inspections. Quality and effectiveness are expressed through achievement of the Early Learning Goals, with children being assessed as Emerging, Expected, or Exceeding. Children who are assessed within the 'Expected' category are achieving a 'Good Level of Development' which, in turn becomes a measure of the child's readiness for school. Assessment data are used to compare settings, and Ofsted inspectors use national statistical data as benchmarks of performance. Given the central role of play within ECE it is perhaps inevitable that Ofsted concerned itself with the links between play, teaching and learning outcomes within the wider policy agenda. However, as the following section indicates, the remit of Ofsted has extended from inspection to providing guidance on 'good' and 'effective' practice.

4. The remit of Ofsted

Ofsted is central to the auditing and accountability culture in England via monitoring and assessing provision against national standards. Their remit is to inspect, judge and report on the quality of education provided in maintained

(government-funded) education settings, and to report on their overall effectiveness, focusing on

The achievement of pupils
The quality of teaching
The quality of leadership and management
The behavior and safety of the pupils

Settings are rated as
Grade 1: outstanding
Grade 2: good
Grade 3: requires improvement
Grade 4: inadequate

Ofsted inspectors produce reports of each setting, and these in turn produce the collective knowledge, via Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's (HMCI) annual reports, about whether standards are being achieved. In addition to inspection reports, Ofsted produces surveys of curriculum subjects and age phases, and thematic reviews that are focused on what constitutes 'good' or 'effective' practice, thereby constructing Ofsted-defined 'problems' of practice. Using the metaphor of the kaleidoscope, what we see through an Ofsted lens is the mirroring, splitting and refracting of powerful policy discourses and how these are put to work in ECE. 'Quality' is defined by the extent to which practitioners are demonstrating the standards for teaching, and delivering the standards for learning, as defined in the EYFS. Therefore, from its original remit as a government inspection body, Ofsted has acquired a mandate to become the sole arbiter of quality, and to produce the 'knowledge' (via reports, surveys and reviews) that influences how practitioners go about their work, in order to produce the desired outcomes for children. Therefore, in light of its remit and power within the meaning-laden architecture of ECE policy, it is important to understand the ways in which Ofsted conducts 'research'. The following section sets out the framework for analysing 'Teaching and Play'.

5. Research Approach: Critical Discourse and Critical Policy Analysis

Research on social policy has become a focus in its own right (Fairclough, 2013; McShane, 2016; Taylor, 2004), and incorporates critical analysis of policies and their effects, including the socio-political contexts of policy production, whether policies produce their intended outcomes, and what unintended outcomes emerge. Policy analysis has been a significant endeavor within contemporary neo-liberal contexts because evidence-based policy-making and implementation is of global concern (Brown et al, 2015), especially in light of policy mobility and knowledge flows across international contexts. McShane (2016) analyses how international pre-school/school effectiveness research has linked investment in early childhood education with positive longer-term outcomes for children, and has informed policy discourses in Australia and elsewhere that foreground human, social and economic capital. Thus the moral imperative to improve children's educational experiences and life chances is linked to an economic imperative of value for money, and a return on public investment, both of which are evidenced through accountability and auditing. Neoliberal education reforms rely on normative constructions of the child as a 'good learner', and of the effective practitioner as embodying the characteristics of 'effective pedagogy'. Setting standards is central to neoliberal policies, because they become the tools and the means by which children can be assessed, and the effectiveness of practitioners can be judged in order to construct the monolithic concept of quality.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) share common characteristics and aims. CDA draws on diverse theoretical and methodological sources (Wodak and Meyer, 2016) but is fundamentally a study of language in use, and of its effects, in the context of specific texts, taking into account the wider socio-political contexts and processes of their production. Within the field of policy sociology, this focus has been widened to incorporate relationships between discourses, power and ideology (Fairclough, 2013). Souto-Manning (2014) has traced different influences on

CDA, including the connection between discourses, social systems, identities, beliefs and morality, and proposes that

> …since social actions become realities through discourses, we cannot ignore the role of discourse in trying to understand complex relationships involving social interactions, structures, systems and everyday lives. (2014: 160).

CDA and CPA offer theoretical and methodological tools for deconstructing and exposing the intentions, arguments and effects of policy texts, and for debating the wider policy-making process, and the power effects of government bodies. CDA can identify how socially constructed systems incorporate ideas and ideologies, how these have evolved, how they are maintained, and who is being recruited into their maintenance and promulgation. CDA also aims to understand how discourses seek to persuade audiences of particular positions based on ideas and ideologies, and their wider systems of reference. For example, institutional discourses are related to wider socio-political systems (such as national and global policies), which means that the power effects of specific discourses can be traced across different levels and contexts. What is 'critical' within CPA is the effort to problematize not just the texts, but their intentions and implications for practice, and, in the case of 'Teaching and Play', for practitioners, families and children.

Fairclough (2013) argues that CDA asks fundamental questions about whether the problems presented really do exist, how they are constructed and by whom, and how they are used to justify a particular solution. Souto-Manning (2014) proposes that a further aim may be to support practitioners in acting back against such finely grained policy imperatives and to consider the wider knowledge bases, ethical commitments and values that inform their practice. Thus CDA and CPA reveal and critique the political, social, discursive, and material effects of social policies, by combining analysis of the language used with key questions to interrogate texts. Consistent with this theoretical framing, the following questions are used to interrogate 'Teaching

and Play' in order to analyse the discourses that Ofsted use, how the problem and solutions are constructed, the context of production, and the implications for practitioners and children.

1. What policy-practice problem is addressed?
2. What is the 'evidence', and how is it used in the report?
3. What are the solutions, and how are these constructed in relation to wider ECE policy texts?
4. What official discourses about teaching and play are produced in this text?
5. What are the implications for practitioners and practice?

6. Analysis

6.1. What policy-practice problem is addressed?

'Teaching and play' was commissioned by HMCI 'to gather evidence to address the recurring myth that teaching and play are separate, disconnected endeavours in the early years' (Ofsted, 2015:1). Inspectors visited a sample of 49 settings rated by Ofsted as 'Good' or "Outstanding', drawn from the most deprived areas of England. They focused on

> the most successful early years providers to observe the interplay between teaching and play and evaluate the difference chosen approaches were making to the learning and development of disadvantaged children, especially funded two year olds. (2015:1)

The links with wider policy discourses are evident, specifically economic justifications for investment in ECE, additional government funding for disadvantaged two year olds, and the focus on raising outcomes for disadvantaged children. The report makes explicit statements (paragraphs 1-5) about the value of play for children's learning and development: play has purpose, and different forms of play lead to valued outcomes in the EYFS areas of learning. Shifting the focus to 'teaching' the report notes the different definitions that practitioners hold of what teaching involves, reflecting wider debates about direct instruction and intervention, in contrast to more fluid,

responsive approaches based on practitioners engaging with children's interests in freely-chosen play. Thus at the outset, Ofsted defines the problem to be investigated, and constructs this as a problem of practice that needs to be solved for and by practitioners.

6.2. What is the 'evidence', and how is it used in the report?
Given its remit and power it is important to ask what happens when a government organization – in this case Ofsted– engages in 'research', with the direct intention of changing or influencing how ECE practitioners go about their work? Given the governmental power that Ofsted wields, it is also important to ask the question to what standards (if any) does such research conform? A description of the survey methods is provided at the end of 'Teaching and Play'. During the survey visits, HMI observed disadvantaged children's learning and development and looked at their assessment records and documents that tracked their individual achievements over time (p.28). A number of case studies of children were carried out, depending on the size of the setting. In addition, HMI

> spoke to leaders, managers and staff in all settings to get the views and perceptions of different adults towards teaching, learning and play. At every opportunity, inspectors encouraged providers to show how their views and beliefs were exemplified in their day-to-day practice. (p.28)

There is no indication of the content or framework for the interviews. Short vignettes, that appear to be drawn from the case studies, are used to illustrate statements of good practice (as defined by Ofsted), alongside summaries of the participants' views. There is no account of the qualifications, experience, age or gender of the participants and responses are mostly undifferentiated between leaders, managers and staff. This can be seen as a significant omission given the variations in the training and qualifications of the ECE workforce.

The evidence from the participants is supplemented by reference to written sources, mostly other inspection reports, including written and video guidance materials on Ofsted's 'good practice' website, and statistical summaries of outcomes and deprivation. There is one reference to the government-funded study on Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (3-16) (DfE, 2014), and one to a rapid review by the National Foundation for Educational Research on parental engagement in education with a focus on closing attainment gaps for disadvantaged pupils (Grayson, 2013). It is here that we discern a 'circular discourse' whereby policy-led evidence is derived from related policy frameworks and approved research, and is used uncritically to reinforce the Ofsted narrative. This calls into question what standards of reliability (if any) Ofsted adhere to in their 'research', and the validity of their recommendations.

As a point of comparison, when researchers within the ECE community go about their work, they use and apply a range of tools that enable them to demonstrate their ethical positions, their choice of methodologies, approaches, theories and positionality. The external environment of quality and standards for research that are embodied in the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) (www.ref.ac.uk) provide the benchmarks of quality – originality, significance and rigour. Although the REF (and similar international frameworks for evaluating research quality) is much contested, the point here is that academic research is subjected to external and internal scrutiny via peer-review processes. Returning to the metaphor of the kaleidoscope, we have to justify our lenses and the socio-cultural/socio-political systems within which our work is situated (the tube), what theories and ideologies we have brought into the system (the coloured fragments), how we have analysed and presented the data (the new patterns and arrangements), and the arguments and the warrant for the knowledge that we are producing (the mirrors and what they reflect). For some, the tenets of reliability and generalisability remain important, whilst for others trustworthiness, credibility and confirmability are appropriate benchmarks. For all researchers, transparency, accountability and ethical responsibility are fundamental to what we do and say, along with justifying the warrants for the claims or recommendations

made, whether this is to funding organisations, the ECE field, or the general public. Other tools of researchers' craft are argumentation, problematisation, critique, de-construction, analysis and persuasion, and researchers may well appeal to reason and emotion, especially concerning wider issues of equity, equality and social justice. Taken together the tools and disciplines of research offer a language of critique, contestation and disruption, and enable researchers to propose alternative ways of thinking, acting and being to those that have been offered by dominant or majority cultures.

In terms of policy-informed research, Oftsed is not subject to any such checks and balances, but at the same time their reports create power effects that work to produce conformity to standards, and to position children and practitioners in particular ways. These power effects are evident in the solutions to the assumed problems of teaching and play, and are reinforced by the circular discourse, via selected evidence and related policy texts. Although 'Teaching and Play' appeals to the dilemmas and problems of practice that practitioners might typically engage with, the report produces 'solutions' that reflect official policy discourses.

6.3. What are the solutions, and how are these construed in relation to wider ECE policy texts?

Having posed the problem of the 'recurring myth that teaching and play are separate endeavours', the report reinforces this with a false dichotomy:

> The successful leaders we visited were well aware that many people's views of teaching and play saw them as being complete opposite. All knew of the very black and white extremes that portrayed teaching as a formal process that children endured and play as a free, unstructured activity that children chose to enter into of their own free will. While leaders accepted that both teaching and play could be represented in this way, they were passionate that their own practices went beyond such a simplistic view. (p.14, para 13)

Again, this emotive statement is not referenced to concrete evidence of the 'very black and white extremes', but does appear to acknowledge professional agency and decision-making. The authors state that "Ofsted does not have a preferred style or approach to teaching or play' and uses a quotation from the Ofsted Early Years Inspection Handbook to reinforce this point. It is important to note that the word 'teaching' is used, rather than the more common term 'pedagogy', and draws attention to what adults are expected to do with and to children (para 10, p.11). However, the definition of teaching sits within the wider meaning-laden policy architecture of the EYFS characteristics of effective learning (DfE, 2017, p. 10), monitoring progress, and assessment of the EYFS Early Learning Goals. Once again, the circular discourse is reinforced, because although Ofsted 'does not have a preferred style or approach to play', this report clearly links 'successful learning' with the Ofsted definition of teaching:

> Across all of our visits, we observed many skilled and experienced professionals promoting successful learning and enabling all children to reach their full potential. In doing so, they demonstrated the facets of early years teaching explicit within the Ofsted definition, bringing them to life in a range of contexts. (para 12, p.11).

The phrase 'bringing them to life' implies some degree of agency on the part of practitioners, and the short vignettes offer snapshots of 'effective' practice to illustrate what 'effective' practitioners do in organizing the day, the environment, and their interactions with children. These vignettes indicate ways in which practitioners turn children's play towards the learning goals in the EYFS, such as introducing mathematical concepts, or extending vocabulary, in line with the EYFS validation of 'planned and purposeful play' (DfE, 2017). Thus play is clearly a space for adult interventions (teaching) in order to 'making key learning overt' (Ofsted, 2015, p.12). The report incorporates approaches to assessment, forms of adult interaction, and the value of direct teaching in activities (such as phonics and number) that are planned and led by adults via 'short, sharp sessions with a specific goal in mind' (Ofsted, 2015, p.15). The omission of the term 'pedagogy' and the

preferred term ‘teaching’ carries disciplinary power because it reflects a wider policy agenda to introduce more formal teaching into the Foundation Stage. In a rhetorical analysis of ‘Bold Beginnings’, an Ofsted report on school readiness (Ofsted, 2017) Kay (2018) also identifies the shift towards direct teaching for children age 4-5 in order to meet the school readiness agenda, particularly in Literacy and Mathematics.

As noted previously, the international research on play, learning and early childhood pedagogies contests the Ofsted claim of the ‘recurring myth’ that teaching and play are separate endeavours. In other words, ‘Teaching and Play’ constructs a problem that does not exist, and over-simplifies the ‘problems’ of practice by focusing on specific aspects of play and teaching. The over-simplification is reinforced by the failure to use any reference points to independent research or guidance on play. Therefore the rhetorical appeal of the Ofsted arguments appears to be clear and unambiguous because the solutions appear to be based on established ‘knowledge’ that the problem exists, even though that knowledge is not made apparent (other than via Ofsted inspection reports). In spite of these onto-epistemological omissions, ‘Teaching and Play’ proposes a set of solutions to the ‘problems’ that practitioners encounter, notably the shift to educational play as a means for producing the goals and outcomes that are valued in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017).

6.4. What official discourses about teaching and play are produced in this text?

Ofsted constructs a persuasive discourse in which it defines the problems, and suggests the solutions, ostensibly drawing on the perspectives of the ECE community (via the ‘research’ conducted for this report). The report does convey the language used by teachers (p. 14, paras 14-15) to indicate flexible modes of adult-child interaction in play, but maintains binary positions between structured/unstructured, formal/informal, dependent/independent approaches. Although the voices and perspectives of practitioners are

important in their own right, the official discourse that is produced here represents a colonisation and appropriation of their language about play alongside wider aspects of practice.

The report places assessment at the heart of teaching and play (Ofsted, 2015, p.23). Assessment is linked to observation, recording and planning in order to ensure children's progress across the EYFS Early Learning Goals, and enable practitioners to 'target persistent areas of weakness' (Ofsted, 2015, p.25). However, assessments are directed towards the areas of learning and the characteristics of effective learning in the EYFS. There is no acknowledgement of the complexities of learning through play, in which defined learning outcomes may not be immediately visible, or that children may be engaging with concepts and ideas that are beyond the remit of the EYFS Early Learning Goals. The report ranges across all areas of provision, including professional knowledge and decision-making, effective leadership, working with parents, and accountability. The inclusion of these themes reinforces the circular discourse because the proposed 'solutions' are referenced to the wider EYFS policy architecture, including guidance on the Early Years Outcomes, which highlights 'typical development' across the areas of learning. In summary, through the lens of Ofsted the kaleidoscope of practice is inevitably policy-focused and policy-compliant. This begs further questions about the level of conformity, complicity and compliance that inspectors expect to see in practice, and about the extension of their remit from inspection, to a mandate for defining 'quality' and 'good' practice

6.5. What are the implications for practitioners and practice?

The Ofsted kaleidoscope constitutes the technologies of practice (the tube) and how those are enacted. In constructing the 'recurring myth' 'Teaching and Play' has taken some key principles about play and pedagogy, which have become the new fragments in the kaleidoscope. Other policy discourses (such as standards, accountability, school readiness) have become part of this kaleidoscopic assemblage, in which the constituent elements mirror and

refract each other. The Ofsted turn means that core principles are split, moved, and re-assembled. The mirroring and refracting represent acts of coercion because in defining what are the elements of 'good' 'best' and 'effective' practice, Ofsted constructs what they want and expect to see in preschool and school settings. On the basis of this analysis, it is argued that Ofsted reports, and other official documents carry political, social, discursive, and material effects that are unbalanced in their bias, and unbalancing in their power effects. These effects are embodied as the 'body of knowledge' that influences how ECE is performed, and the everyday lives and discourses of practitioners. The selective use of policy-led evidence contributes to the actions and processes that connect discourse and power within ECE via 'meaning-laden architectures' (Fairclough et al, 2004). The key messages focus on the importance of direct teaching, and specific interpretations of the roles and responsibilities of practitioners in play and in other aspects of provision. Although the focus is on teaching and play, the report reinforces models of 'good' or 'effective' practice that will ensure the implementation of the EYFS and secure the desired outcomes for children. It can be argued that this report represents at the very least a move towards educational play, and incorporates technicist and didactic uses of play.

By constructing the problems of practice, and the solutions, this report may seem to be liberating for practitioners because they no longer have to think for themselves what forms of play are effective, what practices will produce the goals and outcomes inscribed in the EYFS, and what practices will be approved during Ofsted inspections. The 'problem' is constructed as practitioners' misunderstanding or lack of knowledge and confidence about teaching and play, but without reference to the substantial body of international research on play and pedagogy. In contrast, by placing 'Teaching and Play' alongside the international research, it can be seen that the coercion exercised by Ofsted is counter to the evidence, because it contradicts research on the complex relationship between play and learning, the potentially productive role of peers and adults, and the significance of children's interests and funds of knowledge for planning the curriculum. Moreover, Ofsted takes for granted the efficacy of the policy context in which

its ‘research’ is situated, and does not engage with the problems of practice that are generated by the policies themselves.

7. Implications

Souto-Manning (2014) asks some pertinent questions about Critical Discourse Analysis, specifically what is critical, and for whom? She uses critical discourse and narrative analysis to reflect on what it means to take a stand, what or whose stand are we taking, and whose values are being foregrounded or privileged? It is not within the remit of this paper to evaluate the impact of ‘Teaching and Play’ on practitioners and on practice. However, as a government organization, and as the sole arbiter of ‘quality’, Ofsted inspectors funnel considerable power and influence via the inspection regime. Ofsted colonises the space, language and discourse of ECE through its various mechanisms – inspections, annual reports, surveys. It is through such means that institutional narratives become mirrored or reproduced within the system, which is where the power effects of policy discourses become the lived experiences of practitioners, children and families. The power of Ofsted is pervasive because it has constructed the ‘problem’ of teaching and play, and has produced a persuasive discourse of policy-led ‘solutions’ that enforce ‘good’ or ‘effective’ practice. Reflecting a circular discourse, approved versions of ‘good’ or ‘effective’ practice becomes the lens through which inspectors make their judgements of the quality of the setting, and of the practitioners. The risk to practitioners of not receiving at least a ‘Good” judgement is high in terms of attracting and serving families.

So what effects does ‘Teaching and Play’ produce? Set alongside the kaleidoscope of related policy texts and discourses, ‘Teaching and Play’ splits, mirrors and reflects the power effects of policy in and on ECE. The hoped-for transformative effects are not just on the technicalities of practice, but on the transformation of play into educational play, the playing child as the good learner and the ‘school ready’ child, and the early childhood practitioner as the effective practitioner. Because the language used appears to be logical and solution-focused, the report carries persuasive power, behind which stands the coercion of Ofsted with an extended mandate as the sole arbiter of

‘quality’. Thus within the metaphor of the kaleidoscope, their mandate is focused towards approved forms of practice that are mirrored and refracted through policy-led evidence.

Critical discourse and policy analysis provided a framework for the interrogation of ‘Teaching and Play’, specifically how meanings and truths are constructed using selected evidence and circular discourses. The analysis has revealed that, in spite of the lack of reliability, trustworthiness, or any other checks on integrity, ‘Teaching and Play’ carries political, social, discursive, and material effects. It is argued that, far from being a ‘balancing act’, this report creates unbalanced and unbalancing acts. ‘Teaching and Play’ is an urge to conscription and complicity, and, as such, acts not just to persuade but also to coerce. ‘Teaching and Play’ needs to be read alongside a subsequent report, ‘Bold Beginnings’ (Ofsted, 2017), that focused on school readiness for Reception children (age 4-5), and uses similar circular discourses based on policy-led evidence. Kay’s (2018) analysis of ‘Bold Beginnings’ (Ofsted, 2017) provides further evidence of the direct intervention of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate in matters of curriculum planning and content, teaching and assessment approaches, and children’s outcomes. Ofsted thus uses persuasion and coercion to accelerate policy agendas and ideologies, and to reinforce their intended outcomes.

This is not to claim that practitioners pay unswerving and uncritical allegiance to policies, or that they are compliant to the coercion exercised within the ECE policyscape. As Souto-Manning (2014) has argued, we should not assume a unidirectional relationship between the system (institutional discourses) and the lifeworld of people acting within systems. However, in the current policy context in England, there are concerns about these kinds of micro-interventions into the everyday lives of practitioners, children and families (Wood, 2017). In order to understand these processes from a critical perspective, practitioners and researchers need to engage in a critical dialogue about the wider socio-political systems that influence the conditions under which they work, and how they make sense of their work through their lived experiences. Further research is needed to explore the urge to

conformity in contemporary neoliberal policy making, and what spaces and opportunities exist for challenging or deconstructing policy discourses and their effects.

From the perspective of play, ‘Teaching and Play’ begs questions about what this means for play, for practitioners, and for children. By recognizing that play is central to children’s learning, play and the playing child have been drawn into the policy discourse that is focused on goals, outcomes and standards, a discourse that is essentially a fantasy. The child’s imagined future (progress, success, achievement) is mapped out under specific conditions, and it is the role of the practitioner to ensure that the conditions are created to construct that fantasy. In terms of silences and omissions, it is not only the research and knowledge base that Ofsted has excluded. ‘Teaching and Play’ strips out the complexities of play, the uncertainties of practice, and the diversities within ECE communities – children, families and practitioners. These are the fragments within a much wider kaleidoscope of praxis in which values, professional knowledge and commitments are also refracted,

From a pragmatic perspective, the movement towards ‘educational play’ or ‘eduplay’ within international ECE frameworks is an imperfect policy response to the complexities of play and its relationship with pedagogy and curriculum. The over-simplified recommendations in 'Teaching and Play’ report belie the complexity of research on play, and the pedagogical guidance that research offers for supporting children’s learning within and beyond the curriculum areas. In addition, a great deal of research that focuses on children’s perspectives and experiences reveals the complex intersections between agency and power relationships, peer affiliations, inclusion and exclusion, and how children bring diverse funds of knowledge to their freely chosen play. In contrast with the power exerted by Oftsed, these perspectives offer practitioners alternative views of their pedagogical roles and professional responsibilities, which are inherently social, relational, equitable and democratic.

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