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Kucharczyk, S. [orcid.org/0000-0003-1362-0594](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1362-0594), Pettersen, K. [orcid.org/0000-0003-1864-1554](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1864-1554) and Rowsell, J. (2025) Play and passion: framing children's rich moments of responding and making meaning. *Qualitative Research Journal*. ISSN 1443-9883

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# Play and Passion: Framing Children's Rich Moments of Responding and Making Meaning

*Stefan Kucharczyk, PhD researcher, School of Education, University of Sheffield, UK.*

[skucharczyk1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:skucharczyk1@sheffield.ac.uk); [stefkucharczyk@gmail.com](mailto:stefkucharczyk@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1362-0594>

*Kenneth Pettersen, researcher, Department of Teacher Education and School Research, University of Oslo, Norway.*

[kenneth.pettersen@ils.uio.no](mailto:kenneth.pettersen@ils.uio.no)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1864-1554>

*Jennifer Rowsell, professor of digital literacy, School of Education, University of Sheffield, UK.*

[j.rowsell@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:j.rowsell@sheffield.ac.uk)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9062-8859>

**Abstract:** This short article takes play as its focal point of children's literacy. Rather than orienting reading and writing around what should be taught or how children should respond and understand written text, the authors revisit iconic moments of play and passion in seminal research studies within the field of New Literacy Studies. As postcard moments from the past to inform our argument to privilege play and passion above top-down, operational models of reading and writing, the foregrounding of key moments in past research sets the stage for two research spotlights. Moving inside of two separate research studies, we give a bird's eye view of what can be gained by observing and drawing out play and passion while children respond and make meaning through varied texts and objects in two different contexts. The article therefore is an invitation to think otherwise about reading and writing by embracing play and passion as children's pathway into rich literacy moments.

## Introduction

To write this article, we were tasked with considering how learning to read and write can be framed through notions of responding and making meaning. Responding and making meaning

are salient terms in the Australian Curriculum for Literacy (2024), and they typically refer to how learning areas are understood and communicated by students. In the context of reading and writing, they recall recognisable and well-understood images of literacy conventions: reading a text, discussing the text, reflecting on its content and message, responding to it through writing. *Touchstone 6 of The Foundation for Learning and Literacy* (2020) reads:

Responding and making meaning is the beginning, middle and end of speaking and listening and learning to read and write.

As authors, we were encouraged by the word “beginning” to reflect on our own research with young children and their emergent literacy practices. With children who are yet to read and write - or who are in the early stages of mastering these skills - *responding* and *making meaning* unfold differently. Given this, we sought more expansive ways to think about literacy. As a provocation, the aim of this short reflective essay is to cover one such way to think about literacy: namely, the play and passion of literacy. While not a novel insight to literacy research, in a policy context such dimensions are too easily forgotten and sidelined in favour of narrower conceptions of literacy. Play and passion fade into the background with more traditional and operational framings (e.g., the science of reading or synthetic phonics) moving centre stage. These latter, operational versions of reading and writing can strike a zero-sum game (i.e., gaining reading fluency at the expense of passion and play). So it is with this article that we try to think otherwise about reading and writing as responsive to passions and driven by playful ways to make meanings, by articulating the ways in which literacy research has tended to these issues, which we will illustrate further using examples from our research.

## Play and Passion in Literacy Research

Through this article, we do not aim to precisely conceptualise or delineate the nature of play or passion. Instead, we turn to extant research that displays playful and passionate ways of engaging in rich moments of literacy—through many forms and constellations. But, first, we

draw on seminal moments in landmark literacy research that have shaped the field of New Literacy Studies. In her much-cited ethnographic accounts of children's ways with words (1983) in the Carolinas, Heath describes her encounter with "Ann," a child from Trackton who loved telling and weaving stories prompted by adults and family. In these stories, the child's recollection of real-life events was often combined with fabrications and embellishments. Similarly, Street's ethnography (1993) in Iran documenting changes in literacy practices across communities from British schools to the marketplace to mosques. His descriptions of life in Iran offer readers rich details—for example, ways religious leaders recited stories in the Quran sharing particular moments and figures in the stories that highlight moral tales. Barton and Hamilton's (1998) ethnography of a few neighbouring streets in a town in northern England spotlights properties of literacy practices such as exhibiting "ruling passions"—unique and strongly affective frameworks around which people centre their literacy practices. "Shirley" stands out in their ethnography for her passion for letter writing and producing texts for the community. As a social glue across a network of people, Shirley's passions materialised in her letters to MPs to support community initiatives and in her galvanizing of neighbours to partake in campaigns and community engagement more broadly.

There are abundant moments of play and passion in Kress' writings (1997). For example, climbing a steep hill with his father, "Michael" feels the strain and stress and uses whatever words he has at his disposal to display the affective toll the hill has on his body: the hill turns "heavy." In another example, a child draws a picture of big and small circles representing not only a car and its wheels but also, in imaginative ways, the felt force and velocity of riding it. This drawing is rich with the child's passion and energy for things with wheels. These two small, separate and seemingly insignificant moments in time exhibit children's rich meaning making and responding capacities and how children's play and passion are thoroughly entangled.

Pahl's ethnographies in London recall moments during her research when children embedded parts of themselves linked with culture, family histories, diverse languages, and keen interests into texts that they make with her. For many years, Pahl conducted home ethnographies where she sat with children, their siblings, and carers and observed their meaning making. In particular, she offered the field ways to illustrate how syncretic literacies take hold when children combine their own media and popular culture interests with their familial practices and habits. One such instance happened with a child named "Fatih" who lived in north-west London (Pahl, 2002). Fatih was a player of Super Mario videogames. In his multimodal compositions produced with Pahl, images from the game were combined with the Turkish flag and map-making that he learned at school. In this way, Fatih's texts carried traces of his multiple identities revealing how multimodal texts are tapestries for play and passion that were central for his own pathways into literacy.

This foundational work laid the basis for further ethnographies celebrating moments of play and passion providing evidence of the rich array of children's responding and meaning making. Wohlwend's many studies closely examine children making meaning through multimodal texts and apps (2011; 2013). Wohlwend shows how children's socio-dramatic play can be considered an embodied literacy, where children use their bodies as meaning making devices (Wohlwend, 2019), and how children construct beliefs and understandings about gender through drawings and storytelling (Wohlwend, 2011). Kuby (2013) further examined ways that children embed their feelings, emotions, and senses in their multimodal texts. The drawings, made as responses to reading picture books, showed the children's synaesthetic capacities by mixing sounds, colour, and emotion unpredictably and imaginatively, brimful of pleasure and play.

Yet, placing meaning making as central to all literacy practices is not without tensions. There has also been an important movement in literacy research to reimagine meaning making beyond the literal and representational and instead highlight the affective and non-

representational dimension of meaning making (Leander and Boldt, 2013; Lewis and Tierney, 2013). In a much-cited article by Leander and Boldt (2013), they follow 11-year-old “Lee” over the course of several hours, taking a granular look at all his movements as he engages in game play to play fighting with his friend to reading and so forth. In this article, Leander and Boldt steadily make visible the dynamic, in-the-moment, and ever-changing nature of literacy practices. Showing how emotions affect literacy practices shifts the mindset in literacy research from a sole focus on writing, decoding, and visible aspects of literacy to the more invisible and ineffable aspects of literacy.

Others have applied affect theory to expand understandings of what might be considered a literacy practice beyond reading and writing, identifying socially-rooted, everyday practices such as videogame play as important sites for meaning making. Hollett and Ehret’s (2015) application of affect theory explore how “atmospheres” are created as part of one child’s play in a hospital ward. In one ethnographic study, they introduce us to “Parker” and, by describing the danger and suspense of sitting in a dark hospital room fleeing zombies when playing Minecraft, they explore the atmospheres, which are present, consequential, and felt, yet intangible and escaping our conscious explanation. Similarly, others have identified the layered, emotional characteristics of children’s videogame play as children respond to everyday experiences (Abrams, 2017), how they construct knowledge (Dezuanni et al, 2015) and how their passions and interests steer their textual and communicative practices (Parry and Taylor, 2021; Bailey, 2022).

These are but a few moments of passion and play described in influential and well-cited literacy research. As illustrated by research studies featured in this section, exploring play and passion in literacy practices can help us generate new, expansive definitions of literacy. The atmospheres of Parker’s hospital room show how literacy can be affective and embodied; Michael’s drawing of a car shows how literacy can be multimodal; Lee’s afternoon with

videogames, manga and toy daggers points to how literacy moves across the spatialities of the digital and analogue.

To show how these expansive ways of thinking about children's literacies have informed our own work, we focus in detail on two research encounters where literacy, play, and passion interweave. The examples explore the passion and play involved in young children's collecting at a pre-school and in a bedroom in Norway (Kenneth) and children building in Minecraft at an afterschool videogames club in northern England (Stefan). A common thread of children's passion and playfulness runs through them both offering glimpses of how an expanded definition of making meaning and responding in children's literacy practices might be reimagined and understood.

## Two Moments of Play and Passion

### The Play and Passion of Collecting (Kenneth)

One day, during my fieldwork at a Norwegian pre-school, I see a young boy carrying a rock. A group of children hurry to and from the site, meticulously placing insects on it, making an impromptu insect collection. The young boy struggles. At times he drops the rock, and he loses insects constantly. Many insects crawl or fly off the rock. Surprisingly, this does not seem to bother the children much. On the contrary, the whimsicality seems to be a treasured aspect of the collecting, generating high-pitched squeals and intense running. Another day, and two children are playing Super Mario Run on an iPad in their bedroom, and collect, among other things, toads. After a boy expresses his desire to amass a large amount of toads ("One thousand!"), another boy asks what that would imply. Are any new levels unlocked? Can he convert the toads into some form of currency? No. Instead, the toad boy bluntly answers, he'll "just continue," first by getting ten thousand, and "then I can get a lot."

Childhood collecting can be an easily discernible literacy. To collect napkins, for example, children need to construct categories, share expertise, and discern the meaningful from the meaning-less. Rather than a simple pastime, collecting can thus be a culturally relevant practice, even with educational potential. At the same time, the meanings and functions of collecting can be less obvious, and other dimensions of the practice be more prominent. In the two examples above, taken from my recently published study (Pettersen, 2024), the children display a spirited openness, where they do not attempt to make the world bend at their will but, rather, give in to its unpredictable movements, creating joyous, enthusiastic, and imaginative ways of collecting that can escape logic. However, this is not to say that play and passion are antithetical to making meaning, and the collecting performed by the young children of my fieldwork is not simply a more rudimentary precursor to the more “meaningful” collecting performed by older children. For example, culturally sedimented meanings can emerge from young children’s playful and passionate collecting and form patterns that repeat, ripple, and resonate across events (cf. Pettersen and Ehret, 2024). “Getting a lot of toads” can prove to be a new game, or emerge in new, updated versions later for the boys, laying conditions for new culturally relevant practices. Similarly, traditional collections of older children, such as a rock collection, are vehicles for making meaning, such as learning about minerals but they also—simply—make children “sort of happy when [they’re] getting hold of this stuff, just by picking something off the ground and brushing it” (Baker and Gentry, 1996, p. 134). In childhood collecting, making meaning and responding, and play and passion, are observable and consequential dimensions that can create conditions for the other to emerge.

### The Play and Passion of Building (Stefan)

Tashifa and Sara, both seven years old, are sat next to each other at a table intently playing Minecraft at an afterschool club. Despite the noise in the room from the other children playing their own Minecraft games, both girls have been quietly engaged in a self-directed house building project. As I join them, Sara turns her iPad screen to show me a bright and abstract structure made of bands of coloured glass: it is, she says, opening her eyes wide in an



exaggerated way, a “rainbow-tacular house.” Even though Sara’s structure is fantastical – glass walls, a lava hot tub – this house is designed to be beautiful and functional (she later reveals her dream of becoming ‘a desig]ner’). She enthusiastically points out the beds, doorways, passageways and delineated rooms.

Looking over at Sara’s tablet, Tashifa has her own thoughts on her friend’s glass structure:

Tashifa:        If a house was made of glass – not a good idea – people would see you on the toilet! People will snoop at you and say ‘aww, she’s gross!’ (we all laugh)

Pointing to her own tablet, Tashifa explains that the realistic nature of her own building project – a house in the form of a traditional log cabin – shows that today she is building “properly.” By “properly,” she explains, the wooden house looks like a house *should* with separate rooms for each person, beautifully decorated and with big windows. She goes on to draw a contrast between what she has built and the redbrick terraced house where she lives with her family, shyly revealing that she doesn’t like having to share a room at home.

This moment is certainly a playful one: we all laughed with Tashifa at her comment about the less-than-private bathroom, both girls are deeply immersed in the game and show evident pride when showing their constructions to me and to each other. But there is also serious work at play. As the children make choices about materials, design and function, they are enacting what, on the surface, appears as traditional, representational meaning making practices.

But shaping this exchange is not only their shared passion for Minecraft, evident in their intent gameplay and mastery of the game’s controls. Woven in and around this are fun and enjoyment, the children responding to the affordances of the game where risks can be taken, and houses can be made of logs, or of lava and coloured glass. Also present is the intangible

yet felt affective nature of their friendship, a key and often overlooked factor in children's digital play (Dezuanni et al, 2015).

For Tashifa, placing the virtual blocks allows her to draw on her everyday experience to enact her expectations of what a house *should* look like (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2005; Abrams, 2017). Whereas Sara explores her interest in design, seemingly happy to take pleasure in the simple enjoyment in following a curious interest with colour and her perception of beauty in design. At the same time, the presence, proximity and gaze of a trusted friend as a co-player (and me as a researcher) creates a richly textured space for meaning making framed by a shared passion for gaming.

## Reimagining Literacy Education

Literacy research shows how play and passion—in its various forms and constellations—are imbricated parts of the literacies of children. Play can be what Wohlwend terms an embodied literacy (2018), and students' ruling passions are central resources for educators (Barton and Hamilton, 1997). But play and passion can also refer to the nonsensical, affective, and whimsical. Leander et al. (2023), for example, write about an improv ensemble doing its routines, supported by recognizable socio-culturally shared patterns and references, as well as more elusive “energies” and “vibes.” According to the authors, both are central to the experience of doing improv. Similarly, Lenters (2016) explores how a young boy, “Nigel,” writes in the literal margins of his school notebooks and draws on various online references to create new amalgamations of traditional literacy education and the impassioned fads and whims of his everyday. Writing in the margins is perhaps an apt metaphor for the way children's expertise and interests can be squeezed to the periphery of reading and writing practices by a ‘too-tight’ curriculum (Dyson, 2020) or by increasingly narrow definitions in policy of what it means to be literate (Yelland, 2018; Parry and Taylor, 2021). Play and passion

are not merely precursory phases or motivational tools but entangled parts of the emergent nature of literacy.

We encourage researchers of literacy to be attuned to the play and passion of children's meaning making and responding. As the examples illustrate, passion, fun, humour and the unexpected can be hidden or fleeting and it is incumbent upon researchers to be humble and respectful of children's passions and practices that may be obscure to our adult eyes and ears. Exploring the complex space between play, passion and meaning should serve as a challenge to researchers to refine and develop methodologies that can bring this better to the fore.

As practitioners and researchers ourselves, we are sensitive to the competing time pressures that classroom teachers face, and to the social, political and cultural factors—often existing beyond practitioner control—that determines the scope and rhythm of the literacy classroom. Yet, we would encourage classroom practitioners to look for meaning, play and passion in the many ways children act at different ages and stages of development. We also encourage practitioners to learn from children's playful passions and broader literacy practices—whether reading, writing, gaming or collecting toads—and challenge their own conceptions of what literacy is and can be.

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### *Figures*

#### **Plate 1.**

Screenshot of Tashifa's log cabin. Shows a bedroom for a child with a pink bed.  
Image is the property of Stefan Kucharczyk.

#### **Plate 2.**

Screenshot of Sara's 'rainbow-tacular' house. Bunk beds are on the left and a lava hot tub on the right.

Image is the property of Stefan Kucharczyk.

# **Response to reviewer comments**

## **General comments**

<b>Reviewer 1</b>	<b>Our response/actions taken</b>
Discussion and analysis of the different sets of data are not sufficiently cohered by the use of the concepts of meaning making and responding	The sets of data have been reframed around the central concept of play and passion. An explanatory paragraph to contextualise the data sets has been added on page 14.
embraces too wide a range of literacy terms and concepts which detracts from clarity of focus	Rather than a broader examination of meaning making, we have revised this paper to look at play and passion. Unrelated or extraneous conceptual ideas have been edited out.
issue perhaps rests in the drawing together of data sets collected in different studies with different foci and analytical frameworks	The sets of data have been reframed around the central concept of play and passion. An explanatory paragraph to contextualise the data sets has been added on page 14.
The lens of 'meaning making' and 'responding' remains insufficiently developed and its utility unclear	This has been addressed on pages 1 and 2. We have explained how these terms are understood and how they relate to the evolution of new literacies research.

### **1. Originality**

lack of focused and coherent theory	This has been addressed by simplifying the conceptual frame.
lack of clarity and coherence of the analytic framework	As this a shorter critical reflective piece (as per the brief) rather than a full response to empirical research, a full exploration oof analytical frameworks used was not possible within the word count.
poor connection between the two data types	This has been addressed on page 14.

### **2. Relationship to literature**

attempts to address perhaps too many different literacy concepts	Unrelated or extraneous conceptual ideas have been edited out.
deeper and more focused discussion of literature which explores critical ideas associated with non-representational forms of literacy	This has been addressed by refining the focus of this paper to play and passion.
establishes a sense of existing research into 'responding' and 'nonsense'	This has been removed from the piece.
There are a lot of literacy concepts at play in this paper which are not sufficiently articulated with reference to the literature or synthesised in relation to each other	Unrelated or extraneous conceptual ideas have been edited out.

I suggest the authors narrow the focus of the field and deepen the discussion of literature which establishes how non-representational forms of literacy contribute to emergent literacy, particularly gaming and collecting.	By refocusing this paper on play and passion, we feel we have addressed this feedback.
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### 3. Methodology

There is a surfeit of terms, theory and conceptual frameworks in this paper which are not sufficiently synthesised.	Unrelated or extraneous conceptual ideas and related terms have been edited out.
representational forms of literacy = meaning making. Note that meaning making is coined in this paper but delimited in a way that seems at odds with the cited work on semiotics from Kress, e.g. excluding acts of response which involve affect from the process of meaning making is not coherent with social semiotic theory	
non-representational forms of literacy are defined as 'responding' in this paper. The term 'responding' is coined without clear justification or sufficient reference to literature. Responding is a term which is used in Australian literacy curriculum to refer to activities of writing, speaking and representing etc. in response to a text and hence would constitute what the author is defining as meaning making. Why the term responding is taken up in opposition to meaning making is not sufficiently justified	This has been addressed on pages 1 and 2. We have reframed the term 'responding' in relation to the Australian literacy curriculum.
Is this paper about embodied meaning making? Is it about play and non-sense? Does the term responding refer to play? Can nonsense occur as part of meaning making or only responding? Is collecting a form of non-sense? The theoretical framing is not sufficiently coherent.	This idea has been edited out of the paper in the revision process.
If the focus is on design and play and sense and nonsense, this should come through much more clearly in the theorising and literature. It then makes the terms meaning-making and responding seem perhaps unnecessary. The connection is certainly not clear.	We have removed reference to design, sense and nonsense in the revision process and have instead focused this paper on play and passion.

### 4. Results



<p>It is not clear what kind of data analysis has taken place in relation to the children's collecting</p>	<p>As this a shorter critical reflective piece (as per the brief) rather than a full response to empirical research, a full exploration oof analytical frameworks used was not possible within the word count. Instead the data presented has been reframed as illustrative moments that highlight key ideas found in the review of literature on new literacy studies.</p>
<p>the move from describing collections as providing a 'connection to nature, ways of organising surroundings, a culturally relevant practice with educational potential', to the conclusion, ergo collecting is 'a literacy' is not substantiated at all.</p>	<p>The positioning of collecting as a literacy practice has been further developed in response to this feedback. This has been addressed on page 6, lines 1-3 and reframes the collecting and selecting (as explored in the 'encounter') in relation to meaning making.</p>
<p>Does the Hacket and Rautio' framework relate to the proposed concepts of meaning making and responding? Has the data been analysed in line with the theorising and have the two data sets been analysed using the same conceptual framework?</p>	<p>This has been removed.</p>
<p>The exact nature of the data analysis conducted on the Minecraft data is also unclear, although the conclusions in this section speak to the paper's concerns with responding and meaning making more clearly and tie together better with other elements of the paper. A focus on affect is alluded to and the process of playing Minecraft seems to entail both representational and non-representational forms of meaning, the implications of which do not seem to be fully explored.</p>	<p>Again, the data presented has been reframed as illustrative moments that highlight key ideas found in the review of literature on new literacy studies. An in depth exploration of the data analysis tools did not feel appropriate given the brief or achievable within the wordcount.</p>

### 5. Practicality/research implications

<p>The assertion is made that researchers should be attuned to 'both children's sense and nonsense making' p. 11 line 3 although it is not convincingly articulated</p>	<p>This sentence has been reworked to reflect the narrower focus on play and passion.</p>
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### 6. Quality of communication

<p>culling of any non-essential literacy concepts would assist to focus the reader on the key heuristic of meaning making and responding.</p>	<p>We have done this throughout the paper.</p>
<p>Clearer definition, explanation and synthesis of related literacy concepts is also needed.</p>	<p>By narrowing the focus of this paper to play and passion in children's meaning making, we feel this has allowed us to explore these ideas more fully. Unrelated literacy concepts have been cut.</p>

## General comments

<b>Reviewer 2</b>	<b>Our response/actions taken</b>
the paper really needs a thorough literature review that draws together the larger discussion of literacy	We have addressed this comment by including a literature review of foundational literacies research that frames our focus on play and passion.
Given the word count up to 7000 words, there is plenty of space to develop a stronger lit review.	The wordcount for this article was 3000 words. This limited our ability to explore the literature in depth.
the case for selecting the two scenes from the cited studies need to be more strongly argued as evidence from the literature review as innovative or exemplary contexts to support the case for the 'wooly' metaphor, and the 'sense' and 'nonsense' concept	The conceptual ideas of wooliness, and nonsense/sense making have been edited out to give this piece a narrower and more clearly defined focus.  The two research encounters have been reframed with a focus on play and passion.
I don't feel that the term 'nonsense' does justice to the concepts. Perhaps a continuum from "focussed design to open play" may be useful	This has been edited out during the revision process.
There probably needs to be some succinct but clear reference to the methodology for each study cited as well.	Given the wordcount and the brief for the piece, a deeper exploration of methodologies employed didn't seem appropriate or achievable.

### 1. Originality

it lacks depth in terms of a thorough literature review of areas that are referred to in passing across the paper such as play, music, creative arts etc.	Although there was no mention of music and creative arts in the original draft, we have narrowed the focus of this piece to allow us to provide a deeper exploration of the framing literature.
the paper really needs a thorough literature review that draws together the larger discussion of literacy	We have addressed this comment by including a literature review of foundational literacies research that frames our focus on play and passion.

### 2. Relationship to literature

the paper really needs a thorough literature review that draws together the larger discussion of literacy,	We have addressed this comment by including a literature review of foundational literacies research that frames our focus on play and passion.
and other literacy subject areas from creative arts to English, as well as the role of play, games and music	Given the limited wordcount, and the focus on reading and writing, it felt more appropriate to limit the scope of this piece to literacy.

### 3. Methodology

the case for selecting the two scenes from the cited studies need to be more strongly argued	This has been addressed on page 14 where a fuller explanation of how the two encounters are linked has been included.
exemplary contexts to support the case for the 'wooly' metaphor, and the 'sense' and 'nonsense' concept.	These concepts have been removed from the article during the revision process.
I don't feel that the term 'nonsense' does justice to the concepts. Perhaps a continuum from "focussed design to open play" may be useful. Design isn't a binary to play necessarily.	Again, based on this feedback, these concepts have been removed from the piece and the article refocused on play and passion.

#### 4. Results

the discussion of the two examples needs stronger links back to presented literature	The two examples were included to illustrate ideas included in the framing literature.
There probably needs to be some succinct but clear reference to the methodology for each study cited as well.	Given the nature of this piece as a reflective response to a brief, we felt this wasn't achievable within the wordcount. A stronger explanation of the rationale for the two studies has been included on page 14.

#### 5. Practicality/research implications

Some more examples where existing practices can be affirmed as holding these new conceptualisation (game play, early childhood play, creative arts etc. ) would be useful	This is helpful advice. As the touchstone in the brief related to reading and writing, we felt that a more focused summary of implications for literacy was appropriate. The limited wordcount also limited the depth of our response.
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#### 6. Quality of communication

n/a	
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