

CAN I GO & PLAY NOW? RETHINKING THE EARLY YEARS

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The title of this, Greg Bottrill's first book, had, for me, the unnerving effect of immediately transporting me back to a vast number of adult-led learning activities I have prepped and planned in my own classrooms. These activities were enjoyed by some children but endured by others, who eventually vented their frustration in the chilling refrain, 'Can I go and play now?' Bottrill, who works as the early years lead in an outstanding primary school, says he is 'convinced that you'll never hear those six words again' (p. x) if his approach to creating an engaging Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) environment is followed.

Can I go & play now? has been published at an interesting time for early years practitioners. Those committed to a child-centred and play-based approach have arguably been undermined by the publication of the 'Bold beginnings' report (Ofsted, 2017). Ofsted's report emphasised the need for structured learning activities in literacy and maths during the Reception year, and foregrounded the voices of school leaders who choose to limit free-flow provision and child-led play. With Ofsted therefore appearing to recommend more formal approaches in Reception, despite the reservations of early years professionals (TACTYC, 2017; Early Education, 2018), Bottrill's book aims to straddle the divide. It is possible, he argues, to achieve the non-negotiable demands of the English

early years system through a play-led pedagogical approach. In the first half of the book, Bottrill positions himself as a disciple of Loris Malaguzzi and the Reggio Emilia approach (for information about this approach to early years, see Edwards et al., 2012). He then argues that early years practitioners are able to use play to achieve the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) if they only keep in mind his '3Ms' approach.

In the second half of the book, Bottrill explains his 3Ms: Making conversation, Mark making (which includes both reading and writing) and Mathematics. He highlights the effect that the early years environment has on children's developing attitudes to literacy and maths, advocating an approach in which opportunities for exploring maths, reading and writing are not limited to specific 'zones' within the classroom but integrated throughout the environment. He argues that his approach implicitly teaches children that mathematics and literacy are part of everyday life, and also that it creates opportunities for adults to scaffold children in these key areas of learning wherever and whenever children choose to play, matching learning to children's interests. Practitioners new to the EYFS may find the 3Ms approach helpful when planning their continuous provision in the long term (for example, by being prompted to reflect on their provision by thinking 'How could this area support

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mark making?'). New practitioners may also find the 3Ms a useful approach in the short term when engaged in scaffolding child-led play. The 3Ms advocates foregrounding the development of language and maths as the main learning outcomes when playfully interacting with children, essentially narrowing the demands of the 17 ELGs down to the basics of language and maths.

Moving on, Bottrill then argues that actually there are three more Ms – 'the "secret" 3Ms because they are the three that the adult world are least interested in' (p. 52). The 'secret' 3Ms are: Muscle and movement, Mindfulness and Magic. Muscle and movement, Bottrill argues, are key for developing the skills and confidence required to write, and at the end of the book he provides a writing skills progression scale which synthesises physical development with writing progression. I found this writing progression scale to be one of the most useful items in the book, and feel that Bottrill could expand on it in future work by providing similar scales in communication and mathematics, which would be exceptionally useful for beginning practitioners. The term 'Mindfulness' is less focused on children and more on the practitioner, arguing that adults need to be mindful of when and how they interact in children's play. Finally, in a discussion about Magic, Bottrill essentially argues for playful learning, emphasising that

children are more likely to learn if they are enthused – ‘You can’t really go wrong if you know the magic of your children’ (p. 103). Examples of Magic provided by Bottrill include calling the contents of a spray bottle goblin’s wee, and including a plastic dog poo in classroom activities. Again, these 3Ms provide useful ‘tips and tricks’ for the beginning teacher or the teacher new to the EYFS.

The recommendations contained in *Can I go & play now?* reflect Bottrill’s experience as a successful early years teacher and leader, and his clear enthusiasm and passion for the early years as a unique stage of education. His style is reflective, informal and accessible, and the clarity of his 3Ms approach (or should that be 6Ms?) has the effect of making the demands of the ELGs far more manageable for practitioners using ‘in-the-moment planning’ approaches. For new practitioners, who can feel overwhelmed by the myriad demands of the ELGs and the requirement to spontaneously act on unplanned ‘teachable moments’, this book provides the wisdom and enthusiasm of an experienced mentor and critical friend.

Whether Bottrill manages to solve the perennial problem of meeting adult-directed ELGs within a truly play-based environment is, however, a different question. Throughout the book, he essentially argues that his approach is the lesser of two evils: the ELGs have to be met, but teachers should use play to meet these, as children are more suited to play-based learning. The more experienced early years practitioner may find the ease with which Bottrill advocates using play to meet adult-directed goals problematic, and Bottrill doesn’t fully address the difficulties and complexities involved when intervening in children’s play (for an alternative stance see, for example, Fisher (2016)). A related issue is Bottrill’s claims throughout the book that his ideas are based on ‘research’, claims which unfortunately lack citation. The book lacks a bibliography or recommendations for further reading from which interested

readers can expand their knowledge. In the current education context, with play-based pedagogies under increasing attack, inadequately evidencing assertions about relevant research is unhelpful for experienced practitioners, who are in the position of having to defend play-based approaches.

Can I go & play now? will provide valuable advice and guidance to new practitioners working in the EYFS, and particularly those working in Reception settings. The optimism and commitment of the author shine through every page, and key issues are introduced succinctly in an informal, accessible way, which busy practitioners and trainees will appreciate. ■

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