We need to play for more time

While a new research project reveals that the Frobelian principles of play are more relevant than ever, the authors also discovered that pressures associated with ‘school readiness’ are getting in the way.

The important role of play in developing children’s understandings and experiences of the world is well established in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. Despite this, the current context is focused on ensuring young children achieve ‘school readiness’ and this has contributed to academic pressure in early years provision in England. The term ‘school readiness’ is expressed in England’s early years curriculum as ‘Children reaching a good level of development in the prime areas of literacy and mathematics’. In England the emphasis is placed on preparing babies and young children (from six months old to fouryears-old) for primary school, which they begin in the September after their fourth birthday. Early years settings in England must follow the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, 2017: 1), which sets out a ‘statutory framework’ together with ‘the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five’. This academic pressure has, we argue, resulted in children in early years settings having less time to play. Benefits of outdoor play The pressure facing early years settings in England to show ‘school readiness’ is part of an increased drive to bring early years into accountability regimes across the state-funded education sector, in part to improve the UK’s position in international education league tables, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). To respond to the demands of these new pressures the English government contends that the sector requires more qualified staff and more managers, thus ratcheting up the tension between the cost of delivering high-quality childcare and education for young children and providing affordable childcare for working parents, particularly women. In their recent research project, Dr Kate Hoskins and Dr Sue Smedley, interviewed 33 early years practitioners in six settings, working with pre-school children aged between two-to-four-years-old, to understand if, and how, they perceived they had time to enact Froebelian principles in their daily practice and how they viewed Froebel’s notion of learning through play. They wanted to gain insights into their understanding of Froebel’s concept of learning through play and explore if they had the time to encourage and enable play. Their findings revealed that providing the time required for play is a key component of successful, rich opportunities for children to develop autonomy and self-esteem. One experienced practitioner with more than 20 years in ECEC settings told them that in her view, play is important because children ‘need to learn how to play with other children, how to negotiate’. Another reported it builds children’s – ‘self-confidence, self-assurance and develops creativity’. But the authors argue without the necessary building blocks – including temporal, theoretical and pedagogical – there are difficulties in advocating for and enacting play. Another practitioner explained the many benefits of outdoor play, which is an important strand of Froebel’s approach: ‘I discovered that outdoor play makes children more relaxed and they’re more willing to develop their social skills and just develop their skills better’. Creating tensions All of the practitioners who were interviewed valued play as a way to enhance the social, emotional and academic development of children, yet they reported that they had limited time for providing play opportunities due to the target-driven and academically orientated early years policy context in England. It was found that having sufficient time for children to play is a key issue for these practitioners, but so too is the professional confidence and understandings of enacting Froebelian informed play. A further necessary ingredient to enable play to flourish is a supportive parent or carer who appreciates the importance of play for all aspects of child development, but this support was not always forthcoming for our practitioners. The importance our practitioners attached to play, along with the difficulty of providing time to play, created a tension in the settings. The tension is also fuelled by having to enact government policy which emphasises school readiness over and above other areas of child development. The authors argue that the need to provide children with time to play is worthy of placing further policy pressure on the English government to understand its importance and to legislate for time and appropriate well-stocked spaces to play. They suggest that one way to achieve this aim is to support and train practitioners to respond in practice to the tensions they are faced with at a local level when enacting the EYFS and also their principles in relation to early years. eye