Exploring Time and Place Through Play

Edited by the author of The Teaching of History in Primary Schools

Foundation Stage – Key Stage One

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Edited by Hilary Cooper
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The editor would like to thank all the colleagues at St Martin’s College and the local education authority advisory teachers in Cumbria and Tower Hamlets, London who, despite heavy workloads, found time to work on the case studies described in this book. We are all grateful to the head teachers, teachers and other early years practitioners and of course the children with whom we worked in schools in Cumbria (Petteril Bank School, Appleby Primary School, Armathwaite School, Kendal Nursery School, Eaglesfield Paddle CE Primary School and St Mary’s CE Primary School, Kirby Lonsdale), at St Mary and St Martin Primary School, Blyth, near Worksop, and in schools participating in the Oral Learning and Global Literacy Project, in Tower Hamlets, East London. Thanks are also due to Stuart Isley for interviewing practitioners in Tower Hamlets. Working together was for all of us a memorable pleasure. Also it made it possible to record real dialogue between children and adults; to analyse and reflect on how this was planned for and supported and how it developed. In this way we were able to find out about and build on the existing knowledge and understanding which real children had about time and place. Some names have been changed.

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TIME AND PLACE are accepted dimensions of the early years curriculum. Children talk about past events in their own lives and those of their families, listen and respond to stories about the distant past and learn to differentiate between past and present, using time vocabulary (QCA 2000: 94–5). They observe, find out about and evaluate their own environment, identify features of the place in which they live, and they find out about different environments through story, using appropriate vocabulary, (pp. 96–7). The importance of learning through play runs throughout the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000).

What practitioners wanted to know

This book emerges from an in-service course for early years practitioners, called ‘Making Sense of My World’, funded by Cumbria Early Years and Childcare Partnership. During the course, participants completed a questionnaire asking whether they thought that children could find out about time and place in play contexts. They thought that this was possible, but said that they would appreciate ideas about how to initiate and support such play.

The course had focused on the implications of Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years, the ‘REPEY’ project (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002). Taking this into account we decided to set up a small project to see how we might help children to explore time and place through play. ‘We’ refers to three local education authority advisory teachers, nine tutors from St Martin’s College and many practitioners working in early years settings, several of whom had been on the course.

Research underpinning our enquiry

Sustained shared thinking

The REPEY project was developed to identify the most effective strategies and techniques for promoting learning in the Foundation Stage. This study found that adult–child interactions which involved ‘sustained, shared thinking’ and
open-ended questioning were essential in extending children’s thinking. The adult is aware of and responds to the child’s understanding or capability in the context of the subject or activity in question, the child is aware of what is to be learnt, (what is in the adult’s mind), and both contribute to and are involved in the learning process. For the learning to be worthwhile the content should be in some way instructive. In effective settings almost half of all child-initiated episodes which involved intellectual challenge included interventions from a member of staff. However, the REPEY study also found that, while the most effective early years settings encourage such dialogue, it does not occur frequently.

Play within instructive learning environments

The REPEY project found that the most effective early years settings provided teacher-initiated group work, balanced with an ‘open environment’, where children had ‘free’ access to a range of instructive play activities in which adults supported their learning. In good and excellent settings equal numbers of activities were initiated by adults and by children, suggesting that effective settings encourage children to initiate activities and dialogue previously modelled by staff. Freely chosen play activities often provided the best opportunities for adults to extend children’s thinking. Children’s cognitive outcomes appeared to be directly related to the quantity and quality of teacher/adult planning in which activities and dialogue were differentiated to provide appropriate levels of challenge and children were formatively assessed and given feedback in order to plan for future learning. The best outcomes were achieved where parents and practitioners had shared educational aims and cognitive and social development were seen as complementary.

Practitioners’ curriculum knowledge

In the REPEY project, practitioners’ good curriculum knowledge, in addition to an understanding of child development, was found to be as vital in the early years as in later stages of education. It is necessary to know the questions to ask and the ways of answering, the key skills and concepts which are central, at any level, in different areas of learning.

Planning our project

First we agreed on the curriculum knowledge, the key concepts and skills which, at any level, lie at the heart of enquiries about time (pp. 8–10) and place (pp. 14–16). *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA 2000) defines content (finding out about families and the distant past, about the place where children live and distant places), but is less clear about HOW to find out, the questions to ask and ways of answering them.
Then we agreed on a manageable scale and organisation for the project. Each of the advisory teachers and St Martin’s tutors would work collaboratively with practitioners in a nursery or reception class. This would make it possible to work together, engage in discussion and joint exploration and draw on a rich variety of expertise and perspectives. It would also involve classes in schools of different types and sizes (a nursery school, nursery units, reception classes in infant and primary schools). The schools are in very different social, economic and cultural environments: tiny rural schools, schools in towns, in inner cities, including St Martin’s partnership schools in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. We hoped that this would provide some insights into the importance of the impact of social and cultural contexts on the ways in which learning objectives must be differently planned for.

In each class the visiting tutor or advisory teacher would work with the permanent staff to plan activities on a theme linked to either time or place, within their existing medium-term plans. The activities would include different kinds of play. They would include time for one or more of the adults to observe and engage in dialogue with groups of children. Their talk would be captured on video or audio tape or in field notes, so that it could be analysed later by all the adults.

**Our questions**

Our aim was to apply the key findings of the REPEY report to activities that would develop children’s concepts of time and place. Through collecting empirical evidence from these different settings we wanted to gain some insights into:

- the curriculum knowledge – the questions to ask and ways of answering them, which adults need in order to interact with children to extend their thinking;
- planning skills – how to use the curriculum knowledge to plan for teacher-directed learning linked to free access to activities investigating time or place;
- dialogue – ways in which to engage in discussion with children about time and place.

**The case studies**

Chapter 2 explains why we think that finding out about time and place in play contexts is appropriate and important for young children, and identifies the key concepts and skills involved. Chapters 3 to 6 focus on time; Chapters 7 to 12 are about place.

In Chapter 3 Deborah Seward and Vicki Boertien explore ways of developing children’s very limited social and communication skills and their self-esteem through play activities which encourage them to talk about themselves, ‘then’ and ‘now’. In Chapter 4 Wendy Robson shows how skilful questioning enabled
children to draw on what they already knew about castles and apply it to their imaginative play. Stories about the past raised questions for Alan Farmer and Anne Heeley, which they discuss in Chapter 5. Do imaginary times and places help children to explore concepts of time and place? Can young children differentiate between imagination and things that really happened? Does it matter? Should adults encourage them to move from fantasy to reality? Alan and Anne draw some conclusions, based on their discussions with children. In Chapter 6 Hugh Moore draws on his experience of teaching Key Stage 1 children, describing a rich variety of play activities which helped them to investigate life in the distant past.

Jane Yates in Chapter 7 reflects on questions which arose when a group of four- to eight-year-olds took her with them in their place capsule. In Chapter 8 children are observed playing freely in their own ‘secret places’ outdoors and explain why these are important to them. Jane Dixon and Sue Day show how opportunities for such play can be created and how it contributes to all the areas of early learning in the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA 2000). Respect for children’s need for privacy, and also the rich knowledge many young children have of distant places is the focus of Chapter 9. Cynthia Ashcroft and Sophie Mackay show how story tents, inspired by the tents of Saudi Arabia, North American Indians, the Innuit and North African nomads were made and used in classrooms to develop imaginative play about journeys and other places, as part of the Tower Hamlets’ Oracy and Global Learning Project. By contrast, in Chapter 10 40 nursery children go camping for a day in their local mountains in rural Cumbria and learn a lot about features of the landscape, recording routes so that they do not get lost on their adventures; they even catch a bear. In Chapter 11 children remember routes and landscape features as they help Bo Peep to find her lost sheep. Chapter 12 is about weather. A group of nursery children rebuild Percy the Park Keeper’s shed after a storm and spontaneous conversations with adults about observations of ice and snow lead reception children to set up a role-play weather station.

We certainly did not embark on this project expecting to discover models of ‘how to do it’. We expected that, like all good enquiries, it would raise more questions than it answered. We hope that you, the reader, will engage with our questions and reflections, in the light of your own experiences, as the case studies evolve. At the end of the book in Chapter 13 we draw together the strands which run through the book.
EVERYONE LOVES A STORY . . . stories ‘open out fresh fields, the illimitable beckoning of horizons to imagination . . . picturing the facts, lapping around them like seas around the rocks upon the coast . . . essentially poetic’ (Rowse 1946: 53–4).

All stories are about events and changes which happen over time, in our own lives and in the lives of others, whether recently or long ago in folk memory. Engaging with stories helps us to understand ways in which we are similar to and different from others, to consider why people behaved as they did, why there may be different versions of stories. Stories contribute to a growing sense of identity, an understanding of what it means to be human and of our place in the world.

Young children love to hear, to retell and talk about their own and their family stories: what they did as babies, what happened when Granny came to stay, when they got lost. Often events are linked to photographs or other records – baby books, birth tags, toys, birthday cards. In telling their stories children use the language of time: old, past, now, after, next. They talk about ‘yesterday’, ‘last summer’, ‘when I’m five’ (DFEE/QCA 1999: 104; QCA 2000: 94–5; 2003: 43, 46). They learn to put events in order, to clarify their thinking and ask questions (Why? How? Where? When?), in order to try to explain why things happened: we moved to this house after my brother was born, then I came to play school; I couldn’t come to play school before because it was too far, but now I have lots of new friends (QCA 2000: 58, 62, 74; 2003: 21, 45) (see Chapter 3).

Young children pick up on our constant references to the passing of time. ‘Piglet told himself that never, in all his life, and he was goodness knows how old – three, was it, or four? – never had he seen so much rain’ . . . (Milne 1926) and more recently, Isabel Allende recounts in A Memoir (2003) how her grandson Alejandro surprised her at the mirror ‘scrutinising the map of my wrinkles’, and said with
Kingsbury (1998) lists a variety of picture story books which can help young children understand why people and places change over time. Children can relate their own experiences to stories about growth and change in fictional families, for example *When I was a Baby* (Anholt 1988), *Grandpa* (Burningham 1984), *The Old, Old Man and the Very Little Boy* (Franklin 1992) and *The Hidden House* (Waddell 1992).

Salter (1996) gives an example of how children respond to true stories from the past. During their first week in school she told her reception class of four-year-olds that she was a visitor to the school from a long time ago and, dressed as Grace Darling the Victorian lighthouse keeper’s brave daughter, told them how she had rescued shipwrecked sailors. Children accepted her in role, those who were usually restless sat perfectly still, and two weeks later were able to draw pictures and describe the main events of the story to a classroom assistant in role as a newspaper reporter. (Reception children in Chapter 5 discuss whether they think this story really happened.)

Children also enjoy traditional rhymes and stories set in the distant past and learn about sequences of events, motives, causes and effects in wider contexts, outside their direct experience (QCA 2000: 74; 2003: 20, 23, 27, 28). Nursery rhymes children learn are themselves historical sources found in children’s books in the eighteenth century, when childhood was first recognised as a stage of development. ‘Jack and Jill’, ‘Pussy’s in the well’ and ‘Cross patch, draw the latch, Sit by the fire and spin . . .’ were printed in *Mother Goose’s Melody* (1765); ‘Little Bo Peep’ and ‘Bye Baby Bunting’ in *Gammer Gurton’s Garland* (1748) (Knowles 1999: 547–52). Such rhymes are illustrated by pictures of hayricks and shepherdesses, cobblers, millers, pipers’ sons.

‘Fairy stories’ are set in castles with coachmen, in forests with woodcutters. Through such stories children learn that some things were different long ago and that others remain the same (as they do in Chapter 4). Fairy stories may not be literally true but they are based on folk tales and oral history. These deal with central concerns of human life: ‘Cinderella’ for example, is about step-mothers and -sisters (Warner 1994). Folk tales are about rich and poor people, clever and foolish, good and wicked. Versions of traditional stories from around the world reflect such shared human concerns.

As children retell stories and decode pictures, using language of motive and of cause and effect (because . . ., so . . .), moving from simple predictable tales to more complex ones, they learn to create images of times and places which they have not experienced in reality. Holdaway (1979) describes how stories enable children to escape from the bonds of the present into the past and to extend their experience of the world, to explore emotion, intention, behaviour and human purpose.
Stories and play

As children get older they learn to recreate roles in their imaginative play (QCA 2000: 58, 62, 63; 2003: 20). Penelope Lively, who writes so vividly about her perceptions of time as a young child, in *Oleander, Jacaranda* (1994) says that she could ‘slide off into another world at will . . . It can’t be done now’, and recalls how, hidden in the garden, she became Helen, lying in the arms of Paris, Achilles nobly dying, and how, as Daphne, she fled, feeling the wind in her hair and the strange shiver as she began to turn into a tree.

Sarra Garrs, the Bronte children’s young servant, remembered how she was roped into playing a part in one of their plays, when Charlotte was five and Emily three. ‘As an escaping prince, with a counterpane for a robe, I stepped from a window on the limbs of a cherry tree, which broke and let me down!’ (Barker 1994).

Imagination seems to have been neglected in work on children’s thinking (Meadows 1993: 361). Yet it involves the capacity to conceive what is not actually happening here and now and this requires knowledge and skills. Even if it transforms a story into the unreal and impossible the process is important. Such play involves concepts in which children are emotionally involved, such as good, evil, helplessness. It helps children to make sense of their world. These are the concerns of myths, legends, folk and fairy stories that once contributed to everybody’s understanding of the world. And through ‘let’s pretend’ play about stories children construct their own versions (QCA 2000: 25). This, in an embryonic way, is how all accounts of the past are constructed: by imagining, from what is known, how people in the past may have thought and felt and why they acted as they did. Garvey (1977: 32) found that children create appropriate behaviour for their role rather than simply imitate their own experience; they can become a princess or a knight or own a ‘magic horse’ – my son’s favourite from a Russian folk tale (‘Dun horse, magic horse come when I call you . . .’) – and use experimental dialogue about supposed places and people in ‘alternative worlds’. Children are also familiar with different interpretations in the style of illustrations of stories and different versions of traditional stories.

So do adults ‘teach’ about time?

Of course adults in educational settings traditionally build on or introduce children to stories about families, traditional tales and rhymes, images of past times; they help them to sequence, repeat, retell, and ‘make up’ stories long before they can decode text. They discuss what happens next and why, use the language of time and encourage children to explore stories through ‘dressing-up’ play. Traditionally they help children to mark and measure the passing of time:
morning, afternoon; day, night; days of the week, months and seasons. They do this in all sorts of ways, for example in cards and collages celebrating seasons, festivals, birthdays.

What more can adults do?

Maybe adults can best develop children’s implicit awareness of and interest in past times and changes over time if they are themselves explicitly conscious of the skills and concepts that are central to the processes of finding out about the past, the questions to ask and ways of answering them. In this way children are gradually aware of the processes of their own learning and become independent learners. Discussion about the past is potentially a very powerful way of developing genuine extended shared thinking because usually there are no single correct answers and often children’s ideas are surprisingly valid. And when children’s ‘guesses’ are known to be wrong because of immaturity and limited knowledge, this does not matter. What is important is the process of guessing, listening to the ideas of others, and being prepared to change their own ideas, or to understand that sometimes there may be no ‘right answer’. For young children, as for adult historians, finding out about the past involves:

- tracing causes and effects of changes over time; by
- making deductions and guesses about things which remain, for example asking why they were made and what they meant to the people who made and used them;
- understanding that there can be many different accounts of the past depending on what we know and how we interpret it and piece it together.

Such talk introduces the vocabulary of time.

Causes and effects of changes over time

We have already seen that adults often discuss time with children, in the context of their personal lives and of pictures, stories and rhymes. Maybe awareness just needs to be more explicit of possible open questions and knowing how to listen to children’s answers and extend the discussion. Questions about changes over time involve reasoning about:

- causes and effects (why things may have happened or places changed);
- motives (why people may have acted as they did);
- similarity and difference (what was the same and what is different between ‘now’ and ‘then’; why?);
- measuring the passing of time (time of day, days of the week, months, seasons, years);
sequencing events (in experience, in living memory and beyond).

Finding out about the past from things which remain

- Knowing for certain – Sometimes photographs, artefacts, writing tell us things ‘for certain’. We may be able to find out for certain: who is in the photograph, where it was taken, when and why; how the scrubbing board was used; how much we weighed as a baby.

- Making good guesses – Often we cannot be certain and can only make ‘good guesses’ (I think, probably, maybe, perhaps). What are they saying, thinking, doing in the photograph? Who might have lived in the castle? What might they wear, eat? In this way children learn that there is often no single ‘right’ answer and that others may have different ideas, to which they need to listen and which may change their own ideas. They learn the language of hypothesis. What if? And they learn to explain their ideas to others.

John Betjeman’s daughter Candida has written vividly about how her dad alerted her to ‘the romance of the forgotten’, how he ‘created extra layers of wonder on top of what was already there’. He speculated about who might have made a building, who had leaned out of its windows to enjoy a view. This was not a boring academic exercise. ‘It was the uncertainty of the information that made so many places come to life for me and convey the humanity of the place’ (Lycett Green 2000: 156). Nulty (1998) describes how she used artefacts with her Key Stage 1 children (Arab clothes, replica Native American and Egyptian jewellery, a steel drum) in connection with stories about famous people, to stimulate problem solving, to help the children to hypothesise and to support their conclusions. Harnett (1998) has shown how she helped reception and Year 1 children make inferences about pictures with increasing skill.

Different ‘interpretations’ of the past

Stories, accounts of the past, are constructed by piecing together what we know and what we can ‘guess’ and filling in the gaps. Accounts of the past may vary depending on who does the selecting and what their particular interests are.

Children will come across different interpretations. Grandma may tell different stories about her childhood from Granddad. Two grandmas’ accounts may differ, depending on where they lived, social class, how old they are, their personal experiences. Stories about long ago may change in the telling and retelling. They may be illustrated in different styles. Television versions of the stories of Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest reconstructions may be very different (see Chapter 5).

Children also create their own interpretations of the past in their play and in retelling stories. Of course small children’s interpretations are immature and may be largely fanciful, but they are engaging with the process of imaginative