Chapter 11
Early Childhood Play With Reclaimed Resources: Potential Benefits for Young Children

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable play practices offer many benefits to young children, developmental and cultural, and these are examined in an English context. The authors claim a shared European heritage for children’s play practices; one that has been eroded with the commodification of play materials, the manufacture of commercial toys and games accessible only to the wealthy child. After demonstrating the value of education for sustainable development, the chapter considers how reclaimed resources can be used to promote this end. It discusses a small-scale research project that visited four English early years settings to see whether and how the staff followed sustainable principles. It was found that the approaches of the four settings varied considerably, using resources that spanned the spectrum from commercial to natural, and concluded that more should/could be done to encourage play with reclaimed materials to set children on the path to greater environmental awareness and intercultural harmony.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the learning potential for young children of play that is based around recycled and sustainable resources. It is centred on a small-scale research project on sustainable play in England, mindful that the need to find pedagogical approaches that link young children more directly with their natural and social environment is culturally specific. The discussion starts from an English perspective,
but later is broadened to address a wider range of culturally relevant issues. However, as the term ‘sustainability’ itself is culturally construed, the concept is examined prior to engaging with its theoretical and more practical aspects in the research context.

‘Sustainable’ living is about conserving the world’s resources to ensure that current activities do not adversely affect the wellbeing of future generations. It requires societies to be mindful of how resources are used, re-used and replenished, and how resources are finally disposed of when exhausted. This often relates to materialism (consumer-led desire for more and better goods) and commodification (the allocation of cash values to goods once deemed freely available) as the ability to ‘have’ and to ‘pay’ are both normatively signs of status. In the minority world (more affluent countries) the opportunities for wasteful expenditure are significant and long embedded, and to address this requires perspectives to change. Within education, the focus is both present- and future-orientated seeking to curb current excesses and to encourage the younger generation to embrace a different value system and adopt sounder, more sustainable, practices. Early years education affords (offers) opportunities to introduce, even instil, such values in the very young, and to influence parents, too. Within early years settings children can learn through observation when adults follow sustainable practices, through participation when simple everyday tasks embody a sustainable design, but also through informal play-based teaching; and whether and when this happens is central to the research that underpins this chapter.

This chapter is designed as three distinct but related parts. Firstly, a background literature review provides a theoretical overview of children’s play, toys and culture that looks at a shared European heritage; one that looks beyond the boundaries of English traditions, past and present before focusing on the material culture of Western society today. Contemporary literature is used to offer a broad overview of the characteristics of traditional play activities, to address how people know about practices in earlier societies, and to examine the similarity across European cultures before historical developments, and differing levels of industrialization and affluence, led to differences between (and within) the individual nation states.

Secondly, the chapter discusses historical trends within the UK. As part of the justification for the project, it describes the changes in provision for children under five in England since the 1960s, particularly the move away from voluntary sessional playgroups to commercial nursery chains that offer full day care to working parents. These changes marked a shift from childcare services (that ‘made do’ with low-cost resources) to for-profit centres (requiring expenditure on material goods). Such centres provide a service for which parents (or state subsidies) pay considerable fees, creating an expectation that money will be allocated to the purchase of ‘appropriate’ play resources. Many such centres are privately owned, so face the need to be competitive to survive in a market economy, and this alone encourages the settings to spend money on expensive resources that demonstrate a willingness to invest in children’s learning and entertainment.

These changes in the type of provision were accompanied by significant increases in the extent of provision; there are now many more centres offering childcare. So, collectively, centres have the potential to make a much greater impact on the environment than in earlier times. Taken together, these narratives establish the need for action to introduce sustainable practice into early years education in England. To be effective, sustainability must include adaptations to buildings and organizational structures, to ways of working, and to key issues like nappy (diaper) disposal and/or laundry. However, such major changes lie outside the scope of the current project and this chapter; here the focus is on play and learning and the resources needed to promote meaningful opportunities for ALL children.