

What's in a word? 'Play' in England and the Netherlands

In **England** our emphasis is on free, spontaneous and child-initiated play throughout the Foundation stage (0 – 5 years) and into Year 1. Play should be at the heart of the curriculum, however, we are still in a situation where many Reception and Y1 teachers feel pressure from other quarters and find this difficult to achieve. In England role play areas may be planned and resourced by the teacher, although some of the most exciting play I have observed occurred when children spontaneously initiated some role play, arranging furniture and using alternative objects to stand for something else in their play. In England Foundation stage settings also provide opportunities for children to choose to make things (e.g. junk modeling, clay) and to draw and paint, as well as sand, water, block play and puzzles. An aspect that has been considerably developed in recent years is outdoor play areas that allow children equal amounts of time indoors and out, often offer a wide range of areas, resources and opportunities.

In **the Netherlands** in *developmental education* schools children have a play-based curriculum from 3 – 7 years (up until the equivalent of the end of Y1). The classrooms look very similar to English classrooms and children choose what they will do, although there is perhaps a greater emphasis on staying with their chosen activity, rather than moving around. Brick and block play; sand; water and small world play are evident and special attention is given to the 'home corner' with many resources provided. In one class children offered me a cup of strawberry tea (pouring warm water from a kettle) and asked if I wanted one or two lumps of sugar (which they had). Another school had a large variety of play cakes and breads and a stove with a coal-effect light (but no heat). Some classes had a second role-play area (usually a shop) and might have visited a local shop before they developed one in their class. The emphasis here is very much on exploring imaginary play contexts with real (or replica) play props and in these schools, 'play' is regarded as role play. Outdoor play provision includes large sand pits and wheeled toys.

The greatest difference between the two perspectives appears to be that in England when we refer to 'play' we usually mean any freely chosen activity that children choose to explore whereas in the Netherlands the focus is largely on role play.