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Developing Play: An Evaluation of a Pilot Play Ranger Project in Reading

CRAIG JOHNSTON & FIN CULLEN

Final report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Play Project

This report is the final part of a three-month evaluation into the importance of providing good-quality Free and Imaginative, School-based Play opportunities to Year 4 pupils in one Primary School in Reading. This summary provides an overview of the key findings which mark the characteristics of the Reading Play project. The report provides insights into play for pupil's well-being, social and educational development, and then discusses the potential benefits of providing Play provision within schools. The report offers a brief background to the project with the research outcomes uncovered by the research team from Brunel University. The research methods and an overview of the research follow this section. Drawing on a range of qualitative evidence, this report indicates the importance of providing pupils in one Primary school with play opportunities, playtime with Play Rangers and Play spaces if they are to gain the full benefit from school and learning. In addition to this, the project captures key learning opportunities to be channelled into the development of Play Ranger staff.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PILOT PROJECT

Active Participation and High Levels of Engagement

The Pilot Project delivered vibrant, attractive play experiences to Year 4 pupils. The wide range of Play activities that were offered were accessible, effective and delivered in an informal, supportive style, which the pupils found to be engaging, enjoyable and helpful. These characteristics helped to insure that all Play Rangers succeeded in encouraging positive participation in learning.

"They (the Play Rangers) are always nice to us... they help us with our work"
- Year 4 Pupil

Experienced and Passionate Staff

The experienced and passionate Play Service Staff were perhaps its most important asset. The Play Ranger team are passionate people who enjoy what they do. During the recruitment stage, the Play Service seeks individuals who have high expectations of children and young people. It is this quality that enables them to challenge and motivate themselves into the delivery of play activity programmes which are both effective and engaging.

Meeting the Participation Needs of Pupils

The Play sessions demonstrated insights into how to deliver play activities programmes that meet the needs of diverse groups of pupils. Each of the interactions with pupils had success stories of working with different groups of learners including: challenging and SEN pupils, BME groups, those with low-confidence and pupils with limited interest in formal learning.

Enjoyable, attractive Play Activities and Programme

Pupils identified fun as the most enjoyable aspect of the Play Rangers activities. The finding that pupils perceived their experiences of the Play activities as fun ought not be underestimated. Indeed the observations indicate that Play Rangers were actively engaging pupils who do not consider themselves as successful learners and who may not enjoy the formal school environment.

Improved Skills and Confidence

Pupils felt that there were both social and learning benefits to attending Play sessions. Playing with their peers, working in small groups, and developing positive relationships with adults were all described as benefits of the programmes. Some of these pupils discussed how these relationships transferred outside of Play activities giving them new confidence in their formal classroom lessons and in their social skills.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Achieving a Sustainable Play Service in Schools

Integrating educational and Play approaches when working with pupils provided specific challenges into the work of Play Rangers. Not least, developing the kind of trusting relationships and social environments where educational information can be introduced and accepted through Play. The introduction of informal, fun and appropriate activities often brought an 'open' level of engagement and trust that supported various positive outcomes. It is necessary to look past simply providing fun activities in order to develop staff that can better understand, respond to and challenge a potential lack of social, cultural and educational opportunities in schools. Ongoing and long-standing Play activity related challenges - linked to disengagement and disaffection in school as well as those linked to teaching and learning in Primary Schools - could be further explored and understood through formal staff training and continuing professional development opportunities. Given the complexities of achieving and maintaining sustainable Play in schools, it is important that any new projects develop an understanding of wider cultural, political and regulatory demands on schools. In such a climate, Play Rangers may need to remain flexible about when, where and how their activities are to be delivered.

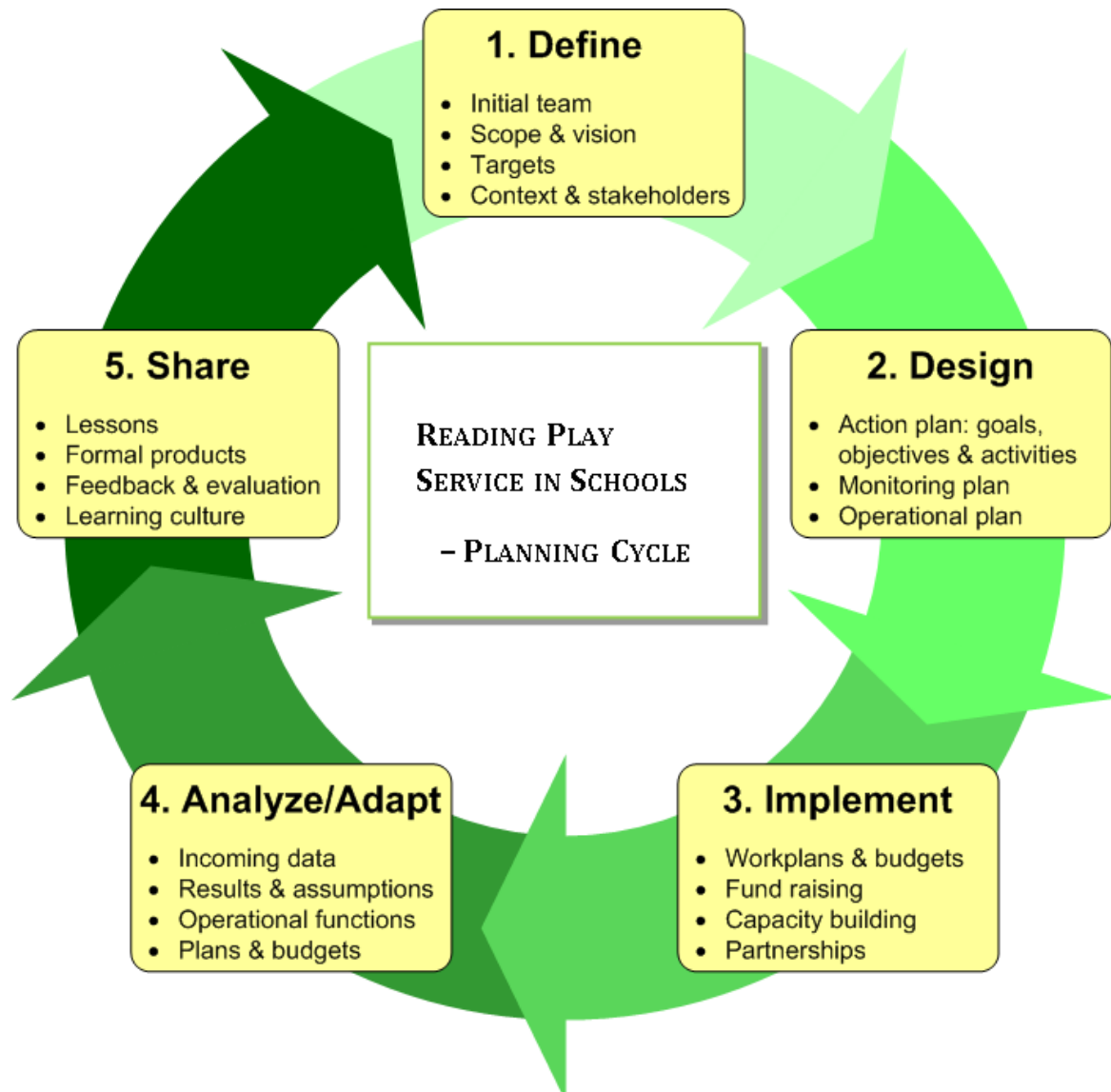
- Play Rangers could consider implementing further planning and review cycles within their work streams in order to evidence 'what works' and best practice and develop the Play Ranger model.
- One recommendation involves the establishment of a school-based Play Ranger 'brand' that is founded on a strong group and team Play ethos. Such a brand consolidates the existing strengths of Reading Play - whilst developing individual Play Ranger skill sets and sharing best practice across the team. This can present a clear Play offer to local schools and showcase the work Reading Play provides to support pupil engagement.

"They (the Play Rangers) naturally seem to know what to do"
- Year 4 Teacher

- The Play Service could make it a priority to offer training that highlights the benefits of Play - and the strategies to support this - for all staff in school settings in order to develop stronger interprofessional working, mutual recognition and shared competencies between practitioners.

Future Development

The Pilot play project provided a valued injection of resources into the school environment. All of the pupils and the teachers we spoke to benefited from the programmes and the research revealed many of the strengths of Play to develop learning in school communities. One area that will strengthen the Play Service is greater (pre-and-post) planning and a clear demonstration of any successes in working with teachers and pupils, in addition to the development of strategies for embedding desired aims and outcomes into delivery and evaluation plans. Fig. 1 (below) offers a useful planning cycle for Interventions for Play in Primary Schools and such a cycle might be incorporated at a macro and micro level within individual and team workplans.



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1. INTRODUCTION

This report offers an analysis and interpretation of data gathered during an evaluation of the Play Ranger Service in one Reading School from January - April 2015. This report is structured into a number of sections. In the following section, we provide some background context to the report by looking at the importance of play in Primary School settings. This section of the report also identifies existing evidence that could help to inform how the Reading Play service might focus and develop their support for interventions with pupils based within Primary schools.

1.1. Children and Play in Primary School Settings

With an increasing emphasis in Primary schools on developing academic skills in the youngest of pupils, there are a number of questions being raised around what role does “free”¹ play (Play) has in schooling? In a wider context of stagnant budgets in Primary schools and decreasing finances in local authorities, questions are being raised around the value of sacrificing pupils’ time away from formal learning, for example, from learning the alphabet or knowing how to count. These questions are especially pertinent for those pupils with challenging behaviour or those who may have established difficulties to learning and require extra time or assistance in the classroom (Leong and Bodrova, 2015).

Across a number of research fields, a growing body of literature indicates important links between play and the development of cognitive skills that are viewed as prerequisites for learning. For example, Play has been linked to symbolic play (Lewis *et al.*, 2000) oral language skills and self-regulation as well as to increased literacy skills and other areas of academic learning (Fisher, 1999). More recently, Play has been linked to school adjustment, increased social affection towards peers (*ibid*, 1999) and the development of Capitals such as social capital (bonding, trust and social skills), and Human Capital (formal qualifications and the creation, and internalisation, of achievement norms).

There is a lack of research in the UK on Play in Schools, particularly a shortage of real and useful information on the role and importance of Play for children aged from 5–7 years. A possible line of enquiry for future research might involve an investigation into the role of play in developing Primary School pupils both in and out of the classroom. Despite this lack of relevant research, a literature review carried out by Play England (2007) revealed that when school pupils are provided with a wide range of play activities outside of the classroom, they can:

¹ Free play is described by Play England (2007, p.5) as: “*children choosing what they want to do, how they want to do it and when to stop and try something else. Free play has no external goals set by adults and has no adult imposed curriculum. Although adults usually provide the space and resources for free play and might be involved, the child takes the lead and the adults respond to cues from the child*”

- explore materials and discover their properties
- use their knowledge of materials to play imaginatively
- express their emotions and reveal their inner feelings
- come to terms with traumatic experiences
- maintain emotional balance, physical and mental health, and well-being
- struggle with issues such as good and evil, and power and powerlessness
- develop a sense of who they are, their value and that of others
- learn social skills of sharing, turn-taking and negotiation
- deal with conflict and learn to negotiate
- solve problems, moving from support to independence
- develop communication and language skills
- repeat patterns that reflect their prevailing interests and concerns
- use symbols as forms of representation.

Play is thus beneficial to many areas of pupils' development, including social and cognitive development. More research is required, however, in order to establish links between the benefits of Play and Primary School pupils.

Moreover, there are also concerns that many children do not have - and are not allowed - enough Play opportunities at home, or in local communities, because of a range of possible factors including the impact of new technology and shifting patterns of socialisation in the form of video games and mobile phones, and widespread public concerns about 'stranger danger' (Play England, 2007). Similarly, Play with siblings and/or neighbourhood children may not be available in some local communities. All of which is not conducive to the building of social connections with peers, the use of imagination or the development of interesting dramatic Play themes. Classrooms and in school areas may therefore provide a unique setting to foster the kind of Play that can lead to cognitive and social maturity. There are other children to play with in a setting that can be organised to accommodate Play, as well as adults who encourage imaginative Play and guide the pupils to Play effectively. Indeed, Vygotsky stressed the value of adults as a catalyst in the process of children's learning and play, suggesting that the development of educational value in pupils' Play relies upon the guidance of adults. Vygotsky's (1976) view of Primary School education encourages adults in education to take an active role in Pupils' Play if its true learning potential is to be realised.

However, the accessibility of teachers to pupils during Play in and out of the classroom and the extent to which pupil's Play can be appropriately supported by teachers is complex. Yang (2013) found in her study of teachers' perspectives on Play in several Kindergarten settings that teachers played a leading or more active role (e.g. facilitator, planner) in practice, rather than allowing pupils to frame Play. Also, Play may not always be valued and/or be a priority in classrooms given the pressing time constraints of teachers and teaching assistants. With their informal style and particular Play related skill sets, Play Rangers are best placed to offer such a role.

1.2. Background to Play Rangers

Play Rangers emerged in line with the Every Child Matters agenda and as a result of Lottery and European funding streams. The Children's Plan (Department for Children, Schools & Families, 2007) and the Play Strategy (Department for Children, Schools & Families, 2008), drawn up under New Labour, created a vision for Play in the community and committed funding investment in the rollout of Play Pathfinder and Play Builder schemes. As a result of the Global financial crisis and the austerity-based subsequent fall in Local Authority funding, Play and Play Ranger Service funding has been cut dramatically. Indeed, only a few Play Services still exist nationally. At this time, many Play Services are constantly seeking new sources of funding and a charged role and involvement in Schools is an extension of their traditional community based service.

1.3 The Play Rangers Role in Primary Schools

The Play Rangers service in Reading was originally established to address the needs of children in urban communities. While their role in the community presented specific challenges, "*such as poor facilities, traffic risks*" (Bradford and Green, 2008 p.3) and perceived 'stranger-danger'. Play in schools presents new challenges. Discussions with the Play Rangers in Reading illuminated specific roles and tasks which have been identified in school settings for them to address through Play. These included supporting difficult and challenging pupils, children perceived to be 'badly behaved', and those who are seen to lack confidence and/or have low self-esteem. The Play Rangers' main objectives in their Pilot Project schools were to offer a quality play provision which supports formal learning in the classroom. In addition, Reading Play provided a continuation of their existing lunchtime games support and sports activities in the pilot school to compliment the programme.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

In this Final Report we explore the key points that come from the evaluation of the Pilot Play Rangers project based in a Reading Primary School. The project evaluated one pilot project. The focus of the data collection was on gaining a deeper understanding of Play in that school and how to create Play opportunities for pupils. Impact, process and outcome data were collected. Data Methods included: observations, interviews, focus groups, and documentary analysis.

2.1 Data Summary

The Research produced a range of qualitative data and addressed developing Play in a case study school. This data therefore provides a snapshot of one pilot project and captured the experiences and impact of the intervention in a school. An outline of any theoretical underpinning for the evaluation is ongoing.

2.2 Case study school

The pilot project for the study is situated in: Whitley Wood – Reading. The school draws its pupils from the immediate area, with roughly a quarter of pupils entitled to free school meals. The school is ethnically diverse. Roughly 60% of the participants are female and 50% are of Black and Ethnic Minority origin.

This area has high levels of deprivation, below average participation rates in physical activity and health inequalities. There are also pockets of deprivation, and the economic circumstances of many families are below the national average (source: 2010, Ofsted Report). The pilot project is actively built upon the Play staff's interest and some of their skill-sets to meet the identified needs of children in school. As a result the programme of activities varies from one child or group of children to another.

2.3 Interviews

Formal and informal interviews were held with key stakeholders including: Play Ranger managers and head teachers. Within these interviews, the Manager and Head Teacher identified specific participants and Play Rangers whose progression could be followed and monitored. Informal and formal interviews with pupils and Play Rangers occurred on visits during data collection. It is not practical to consult with all pupils, teachers and Play Rangers.

2.4 Focus Groups

Focus groups provided a forum to discuss pupils and staff' experiences associated with the project. The focus groups explored issues such as barriers, challenges, attractors, participation levels, and changes in attitudes, skills and knowledge as well as addressing perceptions of Play.

2.5 Observations of play sessions: Summary.

Imaginative Play

- Targeting children with low self-esteem to engage them in alternative activities to those traditionally offered via the Physical Education curriculum
- Weekly Imaginative Play sessions are being provided at school, where pupils are role playing and are acting out various experiences they may have had or something that is of some interest to them.
- Pupils, take on the role of characters which appeared to assist emotional development: Understanding and expressing their feelings through the re-enactment of experience. Taking on roles may encourage discipline and empathy.

Vocal Coaching

- Provision of once weekly vocal coaching sessions to individual pupils
- Use of critical body parts to produce sound, amplification, and control with increased stamina so pupils feel confident speaking in class

Structured Game sessions

- Provision of a range of structured activity sessions with a focus on self-awareness, cooperation, sharing and emotional awareness
- Weekly structured game sessions, provided as a targeted project
- Perceived development of language skills: practising listening, looking and talking.

Being spoken to and talking with other people, also developing an understanding of what is being communicated and asked through body language such as smiles and nodding.

Story Telling/Creative Writing

- Extending play by asking pupils to interact with the writing by offering up suggestions for stories, offering choices over their own adventure, asking them to create and compare fictional characters, their values, their role in both the story and in life.
- Weekly structured game sessions, provided as a targeted project

2.6 Timescale

Site visits were undertaken to the research site over a three month period- January to April, 2015 and contact established with the relevant Play Rangers and/or area Managers early. This allowed for the research team to identify new lines of enquiry via the relevant gatekeepers as soon as possible.

Participant Profile

Gender 40% Male 60% Female

Ethnicity 50% White 50% BME

Age 100% are Under-11

Research

Number of site visits by research staff 6

Number of sessions observed 6

Number of interviews and focus groups 4

Number of pupils in interviews and focus groups 6

3.0 DATA ANALYSIS

This section of the report analyses pupils' views and perspectives on the Play service in school, which are further illuminated by the research team's school-based observations.

3.1 Feedback from Pupils: "they are always nice to us...they help us with our work"

As part of this evaluation we held focus group interviews with a group of Year 4 pupils. The focus group covered issues including their understanding of Play Rangers, the Play Rangers influence in and out of the classroom, and their experiences of the Play sessions.

3.2 Building Positive Relationships with Pupils

Engagement was one of the most important contributors to building strong and positive relationships with pupils, both in terms of engaging with and helping to make a positive impact on children's lives. All of pupils said they enjoyed the informal, supportive relationships that they had with Play Rangers, describing them as "kind", "helpful" and "different" from their relationships with teaching staff.

"(Play Rangers)... are always nice to us and they help us with our work".

In terms of the differences identified from teaching staff, the Play Rangers were perceived as "easier to talk to (than teachers)" and pupils felt that they go to them "if they were stuck" to discuss classwork and a range of other concerns, such as "being stuck in class." Valued qualities of Play Rangers include: 'being friendly', 'fun', 'polite', 'nice', 'accepting' and 'helpful'. Most of the observations sessions suggested that the positive relationships were built upon:

The Play Rangers were able to form positive relationships, quickly

In general, the pupils' viewed Play Rangers as 'cool', 'sporty' and 'fun' and, thus, operating a broader repertoire of skills and space than other adults in the school. The Play Rangers' lack of authority and distance from teachers also appear help spark pupils' involvement in learning with a renewed agency and energy. In short, the Play Rangers appear to be what Schudson (1996) calls "spark plugs" or people who broaden learning, without imposing or demanding any form of oppressive power. To gain a better understanding of how the value of this type of connection is instrumental in helping children, the usefulness of social capital is important here. For example, Field (2005) hypothesised that it is through an individual's investment in social relationships with adults in education, that particular skills are derived. As well as the ability to trust

adult figures, these skills may include such capacities as differing and new communication lines, tolerance, confidence and enterprise.

3.3 Pupil Support in School

Pupils clearly identified Play Rangers as an important source of help in the school who could assist them both within and outside the classroom environment. The pupils also enjoyed the opportunity to meet up with friends and to work with them alongside the Play Rangers.

“Oh ... because you get to meet up with your friends and work with people and get to see all the teachers (Play Rangers)”.

The pupils appreciated the extra focus and attention received by the Play Rangers, particularly in small, informal groups where they could “bond” and be amongst other pupils “at the same (educational) level”. This bonding also infers a sense of belonging and social acceptance, which may be missing in the school’s bigger and often hectic open classroom environment.

“I like this place (Play session) because I like being in small groups, I don’t like being in big groups and I like bonding with ... because you said that we’re all like at the same level”.

Relationships between the Play Rangers and Pupils were reciprocal in nature and highly valued

This bonding and acceptance extended to the reciprocal relationship established between the Play Rangers and pupils. The pupils perceived and accepted that the play rangers were learning alongside them. At times, the pupils referred to Play Rangers as teachers, but on the whole they appreciated that the Play Rangers were simply trying their best to help them understand their classwork. In a real sense, the pupils perceived their relationship with Play Rangers as being a reciprocal one:

“We’re still children and we’re learning, we’re still learning at the moment, so...if the Play Rangers gets stuck, they can ... If the Play Ranger gets stuck and you know the answer, you can help them with it.”

When asked if the Play Rangers’ support helped the Pupils understand their classwork, they overwhelmingly agreed that the Play Rangers “helped them a lot”. See, Appendix B.

3.4 Informality and Trust

Teachers were seen as the key authority figures in the classroom, where the Play Rangers support was perceived as more informal, collaborative, fun and less of an authority figure:

"... when you say that you don't get it, they (Play Rangers)...say it (help) nicely".

This sense of conviviality as an aspect of learning was valued as a fun, alternative to the more formal classroom environment. When asked if the Play Rangers made learning fun, all the Children stated "a-lot" (See Appendix A). The pupils were, however, keen to emphasise that the Play Rangers did not know everything, but that this was where it was "ok". Further still, that Play Rangers would often ask for the correct answer. In the example below, a pupil recalls a time when the Play Ranger had to ask another Play Ranger for the correct answer. This was seen as acceptable, where a teacher was expected to know everything:

"Sometimes they (Play Rangers) have to ask another person if they're right because they might not know everything"

The Play Rangers appeared to be taking away some of the authority, rigidity and perhaps pressure to "know everything" and made it acceptable that adults in education are not all knowing, which reinforces the idea that learning is a process. Here, a pupil explains that this form of interactive learning is acceptable:

"Yeah, because people (adults) in life, they don't know some things".

Researcher: And, that's important?

Everyone don't know some things. You can't know everything!"

Many recent studies suggest that a rigid social classroom environment can at best stifle, and at worst can be actively hostile to learning (Ball, 2003). The data presented here suggests that pupils appreciate the information and learning acquired informally, which can be effective in certain circumstances to scaffold the 'messy reality' of how children learn.

It was in the Playground and during numerous group activities that the Play Rangers were seen as holding the most value: When asked, what would school be like if there was no Play Rangers here? The Pupils stated they would be sad and school would be boring:

"It would be boring because when we're out in the playground, there's not going to be nothing out there ..."

The ability to adapt to different stages of pupils' learning appeared to the observers to be a particular strength of the Play Rangers. In one Play session, for example, the Play Rangers were skilfully modelling play through a

board game with Pupils who were perceived to be difficult to teach. Whilst in the following session a Play Worker was extending the learning of a group of gifted and Talented Pupils. One pupil describes the Play session here,

“We’ve been planning a story, we’ve been planning it for quite a while now and we’ve learnt quite a bit and next week we’re going to start our stories but Mr (Play Ranger) said that we can take it in turns, so we’re going to go round and Mr (Play Ranger) going to help us with all of the, with our work, so like we’re not doing it on our own”.

One example of a Play session that was viewed by pupils as being particularly engaging was Imaginative Play. This session attempted to create a participatory climate. It incorporated a range of different adventures and characters, such as Jungle and Dinosaur adventures, which served to minimise some of the differences in ability between pupils and allowed for group based and individual creativity. The pupil’s involvement in the sessions was further embedded by assigning responsible roles, such as captains or especially to more influential participants. These ‘leaders’ appeared to encourage lesser skilled teammates and worked to include everyone in the activities.

The Play Rangers scaffold formal learning and helped to build pupils’ confidence and communication skills

There was a sense that moving into imaginative Play was a useful way to engage young people of different abilities and genders, including Pupils who were less confident in themselves. Sessions that involve imaginative adventures and characters with props were most popular overall and had the advantage of engaging Pupils relatively quickly and easily.

Overall, it is clear that the pilot project provided a range of play opportunities to a small numbers of pupils in one school. The Play sessions were places where pupils perceived themselves to be engaged, having fun and where they extended learning. This indicates that Play can help and support some Pupils to engage in different levels of activity that may have formal and informal learning-related benefits. Findings indicate that the Play sessions were successful in re-engaging underachieving pupils into classroom work and to allow pupils with low confidence and self-efficacy in the classroom to communicate and to try to be creative in their learning, and to increase their learning levels in small group activities.

4.0 Teachers’ accounts of Play Rangers: “They naturally seem to know what to do”

As part of this evaluation we held focus group interviews with teachers. The focus group covered various issues including their understanding of play, their expectations of the pilot, and their experiences of where Play Ranger engagement had made a clear difference.

Play rangers had been based in the school prior to the pilot. The teachers were therefore familiar with their previous role in school supporting activities at lunchtime. Classroom based Play Rangers were a new initiative at the school. The teachers had a clear grasp of the theoretical learning dimension implicit in play – particular from their experiences working in early years. It was seen as ‘the child’s work’, as something children do ‘naturally’ and as part of kinaesthetic, experiential learning (Gardener, 1989).

“... I come from a nursery background, so play is the child’s work!

So if you look at play in the broadest sense, it’s what children do naturally ...

And developing skills through a more kinaesthetic approach.”

Such activities were not always necessarily seen as central to classroom-based exercises, which were often framed, as being led and initiated by the teacher. The teachers described the Play Rangers as helpful ‘extra pair of hands’ especially with work with ‘vulnerable children’. During the pilot, Play Rangers had been used flexibly within classrooms to support individual and groups of pupils. In this description they are positioned as teacher’s aide - and this may explain why there was some potential role confusion with the pupils seeing Play Rangers during this pilot as a kind of teaching assistant. The Play Rangers had often been initially directed by teaching staff to reluctant learners to raise confidence or to help pupils who found the formal aspects of schooling challenging.

“I’ve found if a child comes in feeling agitated from lunch or break, I just quietly say, would you just be near them today and they’ll kind of float around them, and if they get more upset or fidgety, they’re just kind of there to, you don’t need to be constantly saying, oh listen, listen, or going to deal with them, the Play Ranger’s just there to support them.”

“They naturally seem to know what to do.”

Here, another teacher explains the benefits they have seen from the Play Rangers’ interventions.

“I think the interventions that they’ve run really are coming through, and there’s particular Children that we’ve seen a massive improvement in, especially in the confidence and from the drama group. We’ve got, I think probably for us, is having children coming in off the playground and they’ve had a barney with somebody and they’re not quite in the right frame of mind to come and sit down, and actually not having to take away a TA who’s trying to support a group with whatever the lesson, we’re trying to teach the rest of the class and they can just take them off, talk to them about it, and they’re brilliant, saying can I just speak to this person because I think they’re involved as well. And they sort it out, they’ve sorted out the issue, they come back and the kids are ready to learn.”

In these accounts, Play Rangers were seen as being highly skilled in facilitating dialogue with children and supporting pupils with dealing with conflict. Teachers provided examples where Play Rangers had reinforced key messages from the school to de-escalate unruly behaviour or had supported pupils to resolve conflict amicably.

The teachers also reported feeling very positive about the kinds of interprofessional working that had arisen from the pilot where the pupils had seen *'adults ... all working together on their behalf.'* Play Rangers were particularly seen as respectful and responsive to the school ethos and culture.

One advantage Play Rangers had in engaging with pupils was that they were viewed as being more able than teachers to move between the classroom and more informal spaces of the school, such as the playground. This spatial movement between the formal and informal spaces of the school was seen as enabling greater rapport and positive relationship building between Play Rangers and pupils.

"...they go and play with the children at break-times as well. So the children see them as supporting them on the playground and in the classroom. This ability to move between these spaces meant that rivalry or conflict that had occurred prior to class in the playground was often diverted or prevented."

Teachers suggest the Play Rangers' ability to communicate and build rapport with students had developed pupils' confidence and ability to engage more fully in classroom based learning

"I'm thinking of one boy in particular in my class, who's kind of created a really good relationship with ... well two boys actually, with the play ranger that's often in my class, and you can tell that things have happened on the playground, normally if they come in and they're all like agitated about it and trying to get your attention about it, but recently they've just been kind of coming in and sitting down and then I might hear them mention it to one of the play rangers just in the lesson and then it's kind of done. And they kind of, they feel really comfortable I think talking to them about it because they know they've been out on the playground and seeing it as well."

An interesting feature of the teachers' accounts was the reflection that Play Rangers were a kind of 'role model' and that they were particularly helpful as 'male role models' in the perceived feminised space of the school. This was framed in their different skill set to teachers and a perceived emphasis on physicality and informality. This meant that the teachers saw the male play rangers as being able to develop a quicker and more easily engaged rapport with male pupils than the (female) teaching staff.

"Yeah, it's definitely more friendly and I think they're kind of almost role models to them, especially for our male, like for the male children.

I think in particular the boys that I was talking about really love football and they have a bit of banter going on about football teams and things."

There were some issues raised around the need for greater preplanning and consistency in integrating and consolidating Play Ranger expertise within the school. Teachers spoke about not knowing who was coming in and so they had sometimes organized their work without designing in the Play Rangers' role. From such an account it is clear that teachers saw themselves as leading the education initiative with the Play Ranger taking a supporting role. The teaching staff also stated that they had not always been fully aware of the particular skill sets of individual Play Rangers and felt that it would be helpful to be briefed of the interventions and the skillsets of Play Rangers so that these might be drawn on more fully within the classroom and the school more generally.

"... maybe having them involved a bit more in knowing like the planning, sort of the planning of different lessons, not for everything, but we know what they're capable of but they know better than us what they're capable of!"

"Maybe for them to say...OK, you're doing this in that lesson, it would be really good if we could work with the type of group that are struggling with this or this".

"So maybe having a bit more input with knowing the plans in advance and ... before they even come into the lesson, knowing, right I'm going to be focusing with these pupils. And getting to know them as individuals I think, because there's quite a lot of them (Play Rangers), and we're not quite sure who we're going to get on which days, if we knew what their skillset was..."

The teaching staff perceived Play Rangers as being helpful as 'male role models', perhaps offering a different skill base because of an perceived emphasis upon physicality and informality

Such preplanning and briefing of the school in advance, and on an ongoing basis would enable greater collaboration and innovation in blending Play Ranger approaches within the classroom. This would be particularly helpful around Play Rangers being able to take a more proactive approach in the school, and the potential to establish collaboratively designed and developed interventions that drew on the expertise of Play Rangers and teachers alike.

Teachers also reported that they had seen a clear improvement via the Play Ranger interventions. This had included pupils with raised confidence and provided narratives where a Play Rangers ability to communicate, build rapport with students and take initiatives which had defused conflict and developed pupils' confidence and ability to engage more fully in their learning. For example, this account from a teacher stressed the ways that Play Rangers were enabled to give positive 1-2-1 support with a classroom setting.

"I think they're very positive with the children, so even if they can see someone is really off task, they go in and try and turn it round in a very positive way and supportive way and they can give that one to one support that we can't provide because we're obviously having to think we've got you know 20 odd kids to try and get around, whereas they can go, you're really struggling today, I'll go in and try and get something from you."

A trickier aspect was in the teachers clearly pinpointing direct links between Play Ranger activity and clearly demonstrated changes in pupil behaviour.

*"It's continued improvement ...
So we think that they have had an impact, but we can't pinpoint."*

The Play Rangers developed the communication skills and confidence of the most vulnerable young people

One explicit link the teachers made between a Play Ranger involvement and a direct change was that of a pupil with Selective Mutism. The 1-2-1 support offered by a particular Play Ranger was viewed as directly contributing to the pupil becoming less verbally withdrawn and increasing the volume of her speaking voice.

It may be worthwhile in liaison with the school setting to agree in advance a clear set of criteria to evidence 'change' and that would clearly demonstrate the positive engagement that threaded throughout the teachers' accounts. The teachers spoke of whole range of support activities that had been focused at the year group. Within the discussion it appeared that the Play Rangers' interventions had been seen as a key part of the cumulative improvement in pupil engagement and behaviour.

5.0 DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 Play Service Staff

As part of this evaluation we held focus group interviews with Play Service Staff. The focus group covered various issues including their understanding of play, their expectations of the pilot and their experiences of where pupils' engagement in Play had made a clear difference.

5.2 The Evolving Identity of Play Rangers in School

Each of the Play Rangers had differing interpretations of concepts of Play generally and more specifically within school. Due to its complexity, finding a consensus of Play in a school setting is understandably challenging. Although the Play Rangers agreed, Play is an essential part of children's early development and learning and contributed to an increased social responsibility and reduced antisocial behaviour in school. The Play Rangers built upon their knowledge of Play mostly, through experiences in community sports sessions which help create and assist their thinking around Play in school. Here, a Play Ranger describes the changing and challenging nature of the role from community Play to school based sessions:

"Obviously what we did (in community sessions) loads of different things and I do lots of sports coaching, so it's a bit different to play (in school)...I think they're (community sessions) more, in that terms, it's about facilitating it, having someone there who can run different play activities, using different spaces, obviously using different equipment".

In most cases, Play in school was seen as more structured,

"We're (the play service) brought in by schools to do PPA² PE, so that's where it's differentiated, it's obviously you're running to national curriculum there, you have lesson plans and it's a bit more stringent that way".

This quote provides insight into the initial tension in relation to the evolution of the Play in school, which seemed to be the most significant or perceived as "very different".

"...when I started setting up the play rangers, it was play rangers, a bit more separate and then we had all our after school clubs and play clubs..... then we (started to) go into schools and...branch over to the other bits".

"... (Play in school is) very different stuff (that) we normally do. So it's kind of, basically like being a teaching assistant, another teaching assistant really. So we were leading groups or supporting groups, so helping with their classroom work".

It is also important to acknowledge that not all the Play Rangers are entirely confident in their new role. At an individual level, the relationship Play and formal learning was a complex one in which Play Rangers had to adapt and actively develop a different identity and strategies that enabled them to tackle the circumstances in which they find themselves. In the first instance, the Play Rangers quickly built up the trust and useful bond with both teachers and pupils and from this trusted position, grew into their new role and responsibilities:

² PPA stands for Planning, Preparation and Assessment (UK education)

"...when we first started, we didn't know the children and that, so it was very, like the teacher led us, told us maybe which children to work with or what groups they might want us to focus with...I think, yeah, my group, where they do their spelling and like literacy, it started off that you're kind of told where, who to work with or maybe you're with the teacher, helping as well, ... But after Christmas, when I came back in, after speaking to the teacher, I then started actually leading my own group with that, so ... rather than just being sat with the teacher, so I'd actually take a group and play some of the games that the teacher had kind of done and I picked up on and do that"

In time, the Play Rangers and teachers recognised that the strength of the Play Rangers was their ability to establish positive and productive relationships with the 'vulnerable pupils'. In that sense, trust was established as well as their value in the classroom as informal educators:

Researcher: *"so they (the teachers began to) trust you ...?*
Yeah, they seem to, yeah. Yeah, they definitely seem to, yeah.
Especially when you're there and you build up a rapport with some of the kids...just being (able to) focus (upon) a child does help a lot, knowing them ..."

Play work, often complementary to formal classwork, also allowed Play Rangers to establish and strengthen their relationships with pupils

This connection was essential and inherently valuable, as some pupils appear to be outside the profits of membership that others may gain from an association from teachers. Play Rangers have engaging performances which help to generate bonds among pupils who may not wish to or easily connect with authority figures. By being seen as "cool", for example, Play Rangers can bond with the more challenging pupils. Acquiring a level of respect and is about being acknowledged by pupils as less authoritative, but still "cool" and thus worth engaging with and listening too.

5.3 Establishing Mutual Respect as Educators

The Play Rangers were passionate about helping pupils and made use of the opportunity to work in school to try to incorporate Play into a formal, classroom setting. The Play Rangers initially felt apprehensive that introducing Play into such a setting would disrupt the informal, fun, child-centred approach to Play that was attractive to participants in community settings (See Bradford and Green, 2008). This tension was felt around how behaviour was managed in the community and in the classroom. As one Play Ranger said,

"...(in the community) you're a bit more lenient with them (pupils) and you're maybe trying to move them from that situation but to do ... do something else, keep them engaged doing something else where they're not going to be disruptive"

Play Rangers' flexibility meant that they began to adapt to the classroom settings and "pick up a few techniques... behaviour management that teachers use". Their ability to adapt and to continue to build respect through the informality of their role was a particular strength of the play workers in School settings. In the following quote, the Play Ranger identifies and uses nuanced cultural references (football) to jump in and out of identities, to encourage learning and engage pupils:

"...we're not, we're kind of an authority figure because we're in the classroom and we can kind of have a chat with them if they're out of line but then we're also going there and you kind of almost built up a friend ... not a friendship, but like a good rapport with them. So like I'd go in and while I was working with some of the kids, we'd have a little chat about like football and stuff because they found out early on I was an Arsenal fan because I had like a badge with an Arsenal thing on it, so they saw that straight away. So a lot of the boys in the class are like Liverpool fans, so we used to joke, like come in on a Monday and joke about what happened at the weekend and stuff. So they were still getting on with their work but I don't think you'd ever get a teacher doing that because it would need to be like no, we'll focus on the work..."

In the quote below, the Play Ranger further identifies the potential role of a Ranger in school as a "trusted intermediary" - someone that can affect an ability to exchange ideas and information, and provide a basis that nurtures a pupil's willingness to engage and learn:

"we weren't seen as like teachers either, we weren't seen as their friends, but we were kind of seen as something in the middle which ... I think children always ... we've always had like children always open up to us and talk to us and stuff, and I think trust that we're not going to necessarily tell them off or go and report things. But then also know that ... we also know that if they do need to stop doing something, they will listen and we do that as well. So I think we've always kind of had that chance to be that kind of person for the children, which ... I don't know if many get...So it's always quite a nice position because you do get trust and you do build up a rapport with the children I think".

"We weren't seen as like teachers either, we weren't seen as their friends, but we were kind of seen as something in the middle (as a result of this)... we always had children open up to us and (feel more able to) talk to us"
- Play Ranger

The Play Rangers' ability to shift identity but to retain respect is a quality that teachers appreciate. The Play Rangers in the classroom setting developed from a community-based focus to embrace the different expectations of a formal setting. Play served as a vehicle for fostering social inclusion and broadening social networks. The Play Rangers have also been able ensure the sustainability of their identity in school and have become embedded into this community, receiving support from teachers and attracting and supporting

'vulnerable' pupils. We also observed several Play Rangers who are trusted by the teachers to embrace and carry out a range of teaching and learning responsibilities in sessions. For example, helping to engage and organise difficult to engage pupils within the classroom sessions. The Play Rangers' influence over these sessions is particularly effective however, where they are provided with opportunities to also directly assist the most able pupils.

5.4 Play in Practice – Observation data on initiated interactions

All the Play Rangers working in the schools were observed in play sessions with pupils within formal learning settings. Some observations revealed that during Play, the Play Rangers' initiated interaction and often led Play activities but did not ignore pupil-initiated interactions during sessions. Several intentions were identified in Play Rangers' initiated interaction, including directing and guiding pupils' play; managing a child's behaviour; taking care of a child; playing with a child; offering help and support; praising and encouraging a child; and comforting a child. By analysing Play Ranger-pupil interaction, it seems that the Play Rangers' did assume a share of the power in their interactions with pupils and did not over facilitate Play. The Play Rangers' initiated interactions reflects the need and pressure for Play Rangers to direct pupils' learning, manage their behaviour or to guide pupils directly. Observations also noted pupils questioning, challenging and opening lines of communication with the Play Rangers, which nurtured spaces for pupils to reinforce and engage with their own imagination.

5.5 Management: Planning, Staff Support and Monitoring

Play Ranger management systems consisted of three themes: staff management, lines of communication, and support mechanisms. The most frequently cited theme within staff management was the need for planning both for staffing for school sessions and within the sessions. The following quote provides an insight into the complexities of how to best support staff:

"Like the first day I went in, I didn't know we were only working with one year group and things like that. So I think if we did it again, then it would be nice to be involved in that. But then straight away, like after a week, you get an idea of what the school are after and what the children kind of like and that, so ... But yeah, it's just because it wasn't originally supposed to be my school to go into, I wasn't really involved at the beginning, so it was a bit like, not thrown in at the deep end, but I wasn't 100% sure what they were after, what exactly we were supposed to be doing. So then at the beginning I was probably a bit like, oh should I be doing this, should I be doing that".

Where it was not possible to pre-plan the work and role of Play Rangers in the classroom, the Play Rangers were simply incorporated into the existing culture and working practices of the school which left them at times unable, initially, to embed Play into broader school based activities.

"...to be involved in that initial planning, and so we know what we ... what they want and what we're trying to give them, what we're offering them. And, how we can also put our spin on it more! I know (name of Play Ranger) did more of his stuff in the afternoons, but I was there, I was timetabled just for a couple, for a morning, so it was more literacy and numeracy, so I felt you know myself more of a TA."

One overarching success of the Play sessions was the easy integration of imaginative Play and storytelling outside of the normal classroom setting. However, those types of Play sessions were planned in advance of entering the school. Such pre-planning in incorporating Play into the Year 4 curriculum allowed a matching of a Play Ranger's skills, with the right pupils, and at the right time. In the Play Rangers' accounts this was seen as crucial for successful sessions.

"... (Name of Play Worker) went to a lot of the meetings, so he knew straight away, he knew more (about the pupils and what was expected) at the beginning."

This democratic approach to delivery may not always be consistent with the priorities and outcomes of every school. However, the successful integration of these groups were highly dependent upon finding out what the Play Rangers could offer the school in pre-planning meetings. It also appears to take time, consistency and trust to build partnerships and relationships in order to provide the foundations of successful Play sessions, that pupils can both enjoy and from which they can learn specific skills and knowledge. A partnership between Play Rangers and teachers is crucial for the role of play to become established in the school, as well as to develop sustainable activity work in other schools. Partnerships enable development and sustainability through their capacity to provide access to appropriate facilities, and offer key knowledge, experience and connections for and with pupils.

The Play Rangers were experienced and passionate about Play in Primary schools and, comfortable working with the most vulnerable pupils

Another factor to emerge was the need to consolidate and build upon existing staff development and training. This was often due to a lack of funding and limited time for staff to get together.

"we try and have like training days but they're not always very well attended because we used to do them on weekends, like Saturdays and that, So we started moving our trainings for like Easters and summers and school holidays, to like say on a Thursday or a Friday morning but then a lot of people were say at uni (versity) or have got other jobs so they can't attend and then ... it is hard to get the whole team together..."

Experience of Play within the team was also highly individualised with session plans and ideas being “*very much all in our head*”. The Play Rangers’ advocated a range of methods of communication for the sharing of ideas, session plans and activities with and between staff, including emails, telephone calls and meetings. However, there had been some actions to record and share ideas such as the development of activity cue cards to be shared across the team. Due to the disparate location of the team members, the less experienced Play Rangers appeared to be potentially missing an opportunity to learn approaches and activities from more established practitioners. However, despite the diversity of the staffing team, the Play Rangers all agreed that the importance of face-to-face communication ought not be underestimated.

The frequency of feedback and monitoring varied between Play work sessions, with often very little formal monitoring. A lack of “time” was cited as the key reason that progress and outcomes were not routinely tracked, although Play Rangers received “informal verbal feedback” on a regular basis:

“... because it just became so, we just never had time, with all the data entry involved with it, we never had time....”

Although the Play Rangers highlighted the limitations of gathering an evidence base, they understood the value of feedback mechanisms and monitoring evidence of their work. They expressed a willingness to try and implement a mandatory assessment of outcomes, particularly with the growing need to demonstrate outcomes for funders and regulators:

“I think also where it was obviously like a trial, it’s harder to implement maybe more of the tracking progress and stuff. Whereas if it was more permanent, something that we could write in and something we could say, OK...this is what you’re going to be doing, as a trial, you’re not really too sure so...you’re testing the water to see ...”

By implementing further planning and review cycles within their work streams, Play Rangers might more clearly evidence ‘what works’ in further developing best practice within the Reading Play Ranger model and into Primary School settings. This might include developing work packages, such as further continuous professional development (e.g. linguistics, Play and Children with learning disabilities or other specialist training) for management staff and Play Rangers alike.

Consultation with the Primary School prior to Play interventions is a useful starting point for developing appropriate, dynamic interventions and informal learning strategies and styles

6.0 CONCLUSION – What next?

The Final Report found evidence that Play Ranger supported Play trial in one Primary School setting was a valuable and valued experience. The Play opportunities enabled pupils to learn social, conceptual and creative skills, as well as increasing their understanding of the world around them through the development of social capital. Play in this setting was both a useful tool to engage pupils but also complex in its adaption and use in the school context. Those involved in working with ‘vulnerable’ pupils were, perhaps, seen as using Play in its truest meaning. Play, however, often defies the act of definition in this context. There is no doubt that Play is an essential part of pupils’ development and learning. The benefits of play – to children, families and communities – contribute to increased confidence, self-efficacy, improved behaviour, engagement and reciprocity. The key conclusion being, pupils’ relationship to and with Play Rangers ‘played’ a valuable and evolving role in these children’s capacity for learning; both through the acquisition of new skills and knowledge and in its creation. We hope that our report contributes to further development of Reading Play provision within the town’s schools.

The key contributions and attractions identified for developing Play in schools include:

1. The programme’s appeal to pupils and its support of the teaching environment (the focus on basic skills combined with the popularity of an informal style).
2. The qualities that pupils admire in the Play Rangers represent a combination of play/youth work and coaching skills such as: ‘being friendly’, ‘fun’, ‘polite’, ‘nice’, ‘easy-going’, ‘accepting’ and ‘supportive’.
3. Play Rangers were perceived by the teachers and pupils as being helpful in supporting their efforts to learn and to become involved in the classroom. Play sessions provide a space for pupils in a relaxed, accessible, friendly environment that differs from the classroom that may be inaccessible or less supportive.
4. Pupil support (in particular supporting pupils who have levels of literacy and numeracy below the expected level for their age, and lacking self-confidence)
5. Learning content, style and environment (offering a motivating and attractive learning experience).
4. The added value of the sessions (promoting soft skills, teamwork and enjoyment).

Some of the issues that arise in this report have implications for the development of Play in Primary School settings, and indicate the need for a series of possible actions:

- A greater emphasis on understanding approaches and understandings of child development in formal school settings (*e.g. language and linguistic training*) can aid Reading Play Rangers. This might include ways in which Play can facilitate insights into child development - in liaison with such formal education approaches. Whilst there were some existing opportunities to develop training and support

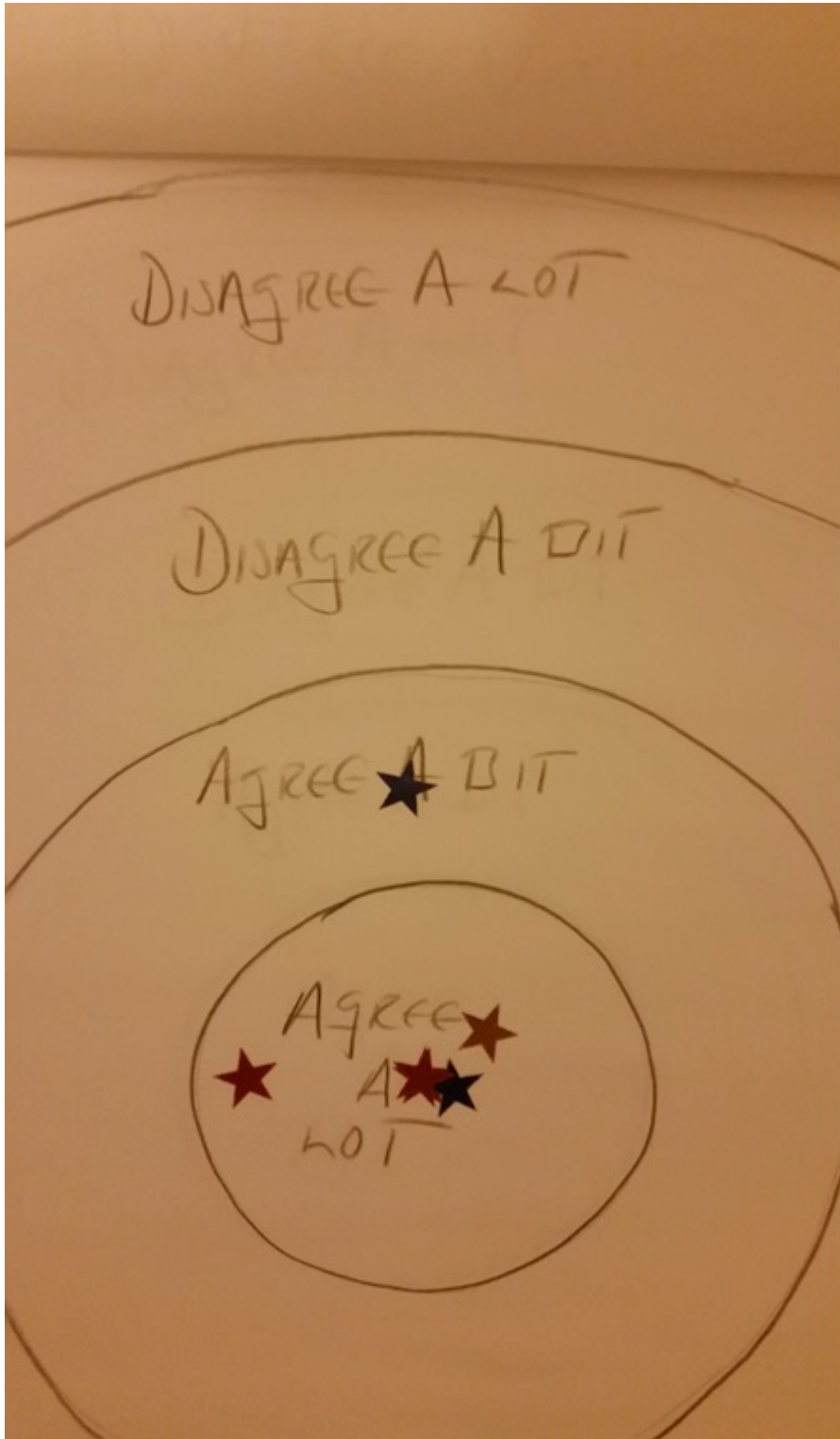
for Play Rangers this might be strengthened further - particularly when moving into new contexts and initiatives.

- The Play Service could make it a priority to offer training that highlights the benefits of Play - and the strategies to support this - for all staff in school settings. This would support stronger interprofessional working, mutual recognition and shared competencies between practitioners. This would be of great benefit as part of the planning cycle in initiating work within a school.
- Play Rangers might consider implementing further planning and review cycles within their work streams in order to gather greater evidence 'what works', and further develop the Play model shaped by best practice within Primary School settings.
- One recommendation from this trial involves the establishment of a school-based Play Ranger 'brand' that is founded on a strong group and team Play ethos. Such a brand consolidates the existing strengths of Reading Play - whilst developing individual Play Ranger skill sets and sharing best practice in Play within school-settings across the team. This can present a clear Play offer to local schools and showcase the work Reading Play provides to support pupil engagement.
- There are benefits in bringing together professionals within schools, such as Play Rangers, teachers and educational psychologists to share expertise with one another and inform initial and in-service training on issues related to Play in order to develop capacity at a school and borough-wide level.
- There is scope to develop a broader and deeper evaluation of this initiative via pre and post questionnaires with pupils and parents, teachers and Play Rangers in monitoring individual and group progress. This would be particularly apt in exploring with a larger sample across a longer period of time - such as an academic year and/or across school settings and comparing to baseline data. Further research could be carried out to investigate Play experiences of children aged 5–7 years, both in their school contexts and in the community.

Appendix A:

Source: Focus Groups, Pupils

Q: Play rangers can help you understand your schoolwork?



Appendix B:

Source: Focus Groups, Pupils

Q: Do Play rangers make learning fun?



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