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The Big Lottery Fund's *Children's Play Programme*: A Missed opportunity to gather the evidence?

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In 2001, the UK Government pledged that “£200 million of National Lottery money would be earmarked for new and improved children’s play facilities” (DCMS, 2004, p.3). As the most significant investment in children’s play provision in terms of scale and distribution at that time (Smith and Day, 2011), the UK Government was determined to ensure the funding was spent to greatest effect. As a result, a national strategy was developed, at the request of the Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell, and ‘*Getting Serious About Play – A review of children’s play*’ (GSAP) was published in 2004 (DCMS, 2004).

GSAP outlined various recommendations on which the Big Lottery Fund’s Children’s Play Initiative was based. Between 2006 and 2012 the Big Lottery Fund *Children’s Play Programme* allocated £123 million to 351 Local Authorities in England, to “*create, improve and develop children and young people’s free local play spaces and opportunities*” (BLF, 2006). This resulted in funding for 1466 individual children’s play projects and included a mixture of capital and revenue funding. A diverse range of play projects were funded, including: supervised play facilities, investments in play equipment, staffed play ranger projects and the development and improvement of traditional playgrounds (Smith and Day, 2011).

The *Children’s Play Programme* and GSAP were informed by the document ‘*Best Play*’ (NPFA *et al.*, 2000), which identified clear outcomes for children’s play provision (Voce, 2008 and Table 1) and was developed in response to a challenge by Government for the play sector to demonstrate the importance of play in children’s lives. *Best Play* was relevant to the field of

public play provision, and to both supervised and unsupervised play services. The document was “the first attempt to identify the benefits of play provision in a form that [could] be the basis for evaluation” (NPFA *et al.* 2000, p.5).

Table 1: Best Play ‘Objectives for Play Provision’

Number	Description
1.	The provision extends the choice and control that children have over their play, the freedom they enjoy and the satisfaction they gain from it.
2.	The provision recognises the child’s need to test boundaries and responds positively to that need.
3.	The provision manages the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe from harm.
4.	The provision maximises the range of play opportunities.
5.	The provision fosters independence and self-esteem.
6.	The provision fosters children’s respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction.
7.	The provision fosters the child’s well-being, healthy growth and development, knowledge and understanding, creativity and capacity to learn.

Source: NPFA *et al.*, 2000.

The authors of *GSAP* identified that, at the time of publishing, despite the volume of evidence that existed about the benefits of play, almost no work had been undertaken to evaluate the impact of play provision for children. Recognising this, one recommendation for the investment included that:

... [the funder] should evaluate the impact on children and young people, parents and local communities of the play projects they fund and also build up a database of what works and what does not. (DCMS, 2004, p. 7)

At a local level, the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) required each Local Authority that was in receipt of funds, to undertake a self-evaluation. The funding guidance stated “... *you [the local authority] are in charge of the [self-evaluation] process and we would not normally ask to see any report*” (BLF, 2006, p.16). It is widely accepted that making such unaccountable recommendations for evaluation is problematic (Newcomer *et al.*, 2010; Quinn-Patton 2008; Radhakrishna and Relado, 2009; Taylor *et al.*, 2005). Understanding how programme managers view evaluation influences the way in which evaluation is undertaken and the way in which the findings are used, which ultimately impacts on the utility of the evaluation process.

As the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) had intimated, the Big Lottery Fund’s *Children’s Play Programme* provided an ideal opportunity to develop a comprehensive evidence base of the impact of investing in children’s play provision. The *Best Play* objectives offered a standardised framework against which each of the 1466 projects could be evaluated (Table 1). However, what transpired for this nationwide programme delivered by 351 different Local Authorities was a distinct lack of a standardised approach to evaluating and monitoring the programme at a project level (Long, 2012). In 2011, the national evaluation of the programme concurred that this was an opportunity missed to consistently evaluate the impact of the funding on outcomes for children, due to a lack of coherence between the monitoring data and outcome measures. Smith and Day argued that:

... the common monitoring framework, based on the seven objectives of ‘Best Play’... was not entirely successful in capturing the data that would be required to assess objectively whether the program achieved all of the strategic aims. (2011, p .8)

The national evaluation tended to focus on programme activities and outputs, which the then Department for Children Schools and Families identify as “*service specifications, delivery mechanisms and procedures*” rather than outcomes which DCSF defined as “*end results, they can describe different aspects of well-being for whole populations ... or they can refer to the well-being achieved for users of a particular service or intervention over time*” (DCSF, 2008 p.7).

Furthermore, data for the national evaluation was generated through surveying local authority representatives and individual project managers. It was on this basis that claims for the impact of the programme on children, young people and the local community were based. As such, claims by Smith and Day for 'outcomes' for children, young people and communities are based on a "*subjective assessment of the Programme's success*" and carry "*some degree of positive bias*" (2011 p. 40). Setting aside issues of bias and subjectivity, the national programme design was systematically weakened in that it allowed adult service providers to speak on behalf of child service users.

There are similarities between this and Lloyd and Harrington's (2012) case study of Sure Start Local Programmes - another UK-based, large-scale, complex national initiative. They too found a mismatch between the local and national evaluation, which resulted in local level data not being integrated into the national evaluation. The authors identified this as a "*missed opportunity*" (p. 97) which resulted in a lack of meaningful evidence of the impact of the Sure Start Programme. This was attributed to the level of autonomy regarding what and when the individual Sure Start projects evaluated, which resulted in difficulties demonstrating the impact of the funding at a national level.

The national evaluation of the *Children's Play Programme* avoided an '*overly prescriptive approach to describing and measuring outcomes for play*' (Smith and Day 2011, 6). Unfortunately, this implies that the aspirations of *GSAP* to evaluate the impact of the funding on children and young people, parents and local communities were not achieved.

Now that the *Children's Play Programme* has finished, the question of legacy emerges. The investment presented an opportunity to gather evidence which would support subsequent claims for sustained funding for children's play provision in its various forms in England. Despite "*the various benefits of play [being] beyond doubt*" (Hännikainen, *et al.* 2013 p. 165), the current UK Government continues to fail to commit to a "*clear policy on children's play*" (Play

England, 2011a), and play provision in England continues to be hit hard as a result of the austerity measures (Jozwiak, 2014; McKendrick *et al.* in the introduction to this collection; Play England, 2011b). The failure to capitalise upon the opportunity to provide a strong evidence-based case for national play investment is all the more important if, as Newcomer *et al.* (2010) contend, decisions can be influenced when credible evaluation findings are communicated to funders, and policy and programme managers.

The UK Government is placing an increased emphasis on early intervention to address poor outcomes for children (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2013). Early intervention, in this regard, is identified as being about improving the “*essential social and emotional capabilities*” which babies, children and young people need for the rest of their lives (Allan, 2011a, p.1). Allan’s independent review of early intervention as a mechanism for ‘smarter investment, massive savings’ (Allan, 2011a, p.vii), called for early intervention to take a central role in UK policy and practice, and recommended a focusing of investment towards “*early intervention programmes with robust evidence based evaluation systems*” (2011b, p.xix). For many years, a wide range of professionals, from within play and beyond have articulated the value of play in the early development of children (e.g. Shipley, 2012).

However, recent announcements by the Department for Education highlight a distinct lack of understanding of the value of play for the developing child, dismissing the need to allow children opportunities to play freely during their early childhood. Consultations on a review of qualifications for practitioners engaged in care for children under the age of five years, and the regulation and inspection of childcare, reveal a distinct lack of value placed on providing play opportunities for the developing child (Department for Education, 2013). Instead, the developmental benefits of play for young children are being overridden by a move towards formal early education.

Beunderman (2010) suggests that as long as play is accepted as having beneficial effects and is relevant in, and of itself, then the key variable is the extent to which children can access it. This

view correlates with Russell and Lester's (2008) proposition that play provision should be judged on whether or not it enables children to play, rather than on other instrumental outcomes. However, current developments within UK Government policy, suggest that evidencing differential access to play will not, *per se*, encourage investment to redress such imbalances. Lloyd and Harrington highlight the increased demand for evidence of the impact and outcomes to arise from national initiatives, suggesting that having a solid evidence base of impact and outcomes, can help to "*safeguard effective services by providing valuable evidence of the efficacy of initiatives and the need for continued funding*" (2012, p. 96). As such, the evidence-base of the argument for continued and new funding for children's play needs to be strengthened. The Big Lottery Fund offered an opportunity to capture evaluation evidence on a large scale. This was an opportunity missed. If children's play in England is to be considered an 'effective service', more needs to be done to provide evaluation evidence to support this claim.

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