



Everything is awesome! Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) and the interaction between leisure, education, mental health and wellbeing

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Everything is awesome! Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) and the interaction between leisure, education, mental health and wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore the use of Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (CYP) in an educational setting. It investigates how best to manage anxiety and facilitate a better understanding of the transition process whereby pupils move either between year groups, or to new schools. The study adopts a creative multi-sensory methodology whereby the focus is upon the Lego® and not the child. Data were collected in a UK junior school from four workshops, comprising sixty-four children, ranging between seven and eleven years old. Using the Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) method, preliminary results highlight four key overarching themes associated with child anxiety surrounding the school transition process. These are (i) places, (ii) pathways, (iii) programming and (iv) people. Wider implications for other age groups and other transition scenarios are explored. A series of remedies and solutions are proposed, and recommendations for further development of the method within an educational context are highlighted. In the leisure context, this study contributes to knowledge through a playful lens by using Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) as a creative methodology to highlight the unique interaction between leisure, education and mental health and wellbeing.

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1. Introduction

Sport and physical activity are frequently cited as effective tools for supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children (Shipway et al., 2022). However, not all children are inspired by physical activity, and have preferences for a more diverse interaction with leisure-based activities. This paper proposes an alternative support mechanism, utilising the power of play. We will identify opportunities to utilise the Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) technique to (i) build resilience; (ii) foster and support mindfulness; and to (iii) enhance mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (CYP) within an educational setting. The focus is upon using a playful lens (Reeve, 2021) to create a positive narrative surrounding those young people, in this case school children, who were so negatively affected by the COVID-19 global pandemic.

The use of Lego® Serious Play® has been proven in supporting organisations including Google, The International Red Cross, and NASA who have used this method in solving their complex real-

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world problems (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). Whilst LSP was primarily developed for use in business contexts (Peabody, 2015), many of the principles, which underpin the methodology are supported within the educational research literature, in the context of further and higher education (McCusker, 2014). As such, we support this perspective and argue these techniques are equally as effective when applied in the context of supporting children's mental health, when delivered in everyday educational environments, and with the focus upon the immersion of children within a leisure-based activity.

The underlying aim of this study was to use the Lego® Serious Play® methodology to explore a core challenge facing many children within a school setting. This challenge/issue was how best to manage pupil anxiety and facilitate a better understanding of the '*transition process*' whereby pupils move either between year groups, or to a new school. Lucy and Reay (2000, p.191) described education as an 'anxiety-ridden enterprise', whilst Giddens (1991) highlighted the feelings of 'anxious readiness', which resonates with how some children experience the transition process. The study also seeks to explore potential strategies and tactics to (i) support and improve child well-being by introducing playfulness into various school education settings and help them (re) connect; (ii) offer a mechanism for platforming and amplifying diverse, authentic voices and perspectives of children within those settings, and (iii) allow those young people to feel comfortable expressing their personal views and lived experiences, given the focus is more on the model constructed than on the child.

Wengel et al. (2016) highlighted a key benefit of Lego® Serious Play® is the use of metaphors allowing participants to metaphorically explore their socially constructed realities and their relationships. They suggest the building of Lego® models reveals multiple realities of the phenomenon and more nuanced insights into participants' experiences. The study draws further attention to the contemporary landscape of mental health and wellbeing, and the lived experiences that children bring to their education environment and everyday social and leisure-based encounters, within the school setting. The findings also highlight the further potential for real-world impact from this creative methodological approach, both in the short and long-term. This is part of a process whereby both children and teachers are actively involved in the development and testing of the study.

2. An overview of literature

Leisure & play

Lego® Serious Play® provides an alternative support mechanism, through the power of play to foster joy (Schottelkorb et al., 2015). Serious play has been established as a set of activities and process, which engender creativity and innovation (McCusker, 2020), and help to bring this creativity and vitality within play to serious matters, including mental health. One globally recognised quality of Lego® is that it induces play by connecting parts, which have endless and unlimited possibilities, enabling participants to consider connections, patterns, and relationships using 'abstractions of reality in a more comprehensible form' (Wolf, 2014). An important aspect of the LSP process is the free-thinking, non-judgemental and playful interactions between participants (Jensen et al., 2018).

Play is generally defined as an activity that participants engage in voluntarily and without coercion (Hinshorne & Schneider, 2012; Huizinga, 1955), and if they are coerced or forced into an activity, it then ceases to be playful. The LSP method has an emphasis upon being 'playful, exploratory and creative, with freedom for participants to experiment and test out ideas without fear of failure or being wrong'. (A. R. James, 2013, p. 2). Whilst creativity can generate 'why something is'; the use of play and playfulness can inspire the 'what if' (Willard, 2016). Play allows participants, like the children in this study, to view or experience familiar problems in a new way and creates safe spaces (in their everyday classroom environments) for experimenting with new

solutions. Reeve (2021) advocated the need for compassionate playfulness in dark times. In our current world faced with pandemics, wars, energy crises, and cost of living increases, this study will critique the important role of playfulness in times of crisis, and the potential contribution towards supporting mental health within educational settings.

The concept of ‘play’ in education describes a process where a person (normally a child) will learn to make sense of the world around them (McCusker, 2014). This aligns with the foundational works of Piaget (1936) whose view of constructivism proposes that a learner’s knowledge and meanings are ‘constructed’ through the interaction of their ideas and experiences. Papert (1986) extends this notion by suggesting that people can learn by creating and testing mental models, and this process is more effective when people are afforded opportunities to extend this to the creation of physical models in the real world. McCusker (2020) identifies that one of the underlying principles of LSP is the ability to create a play state which allows authentic voices to emerge and to be heard. In his earlier work, McCusker, (2014) highlights the close connection between the brain and the hands and that there is a case to argue that the physical manipulation of objects, in creating mediating artefacts, can exploit this close relationship between the hand and the mind. In fact, Trivium (2013) argues that 70–80% of our brain cells are connected to our hands, physically handling objects and constructing things activates a richer kind of learning.

In an educational setting Jensen et al. (2018) suggest that playful activities can help students improve communication and creativity through a liberated, unfiltered and less self-preserving expression. Their logic is that children at play can learn better, form stronger bonds and make imaginative leaps because a mind at play is open to new possibilities, willing to explore in ways that more serious-minded states often impede and allows for novel ideas to emerge and be shared (Roos, 2006). Play creates opportunities for constructing and adapting stories that relate to participants’ lived experiences and personal perspectives (Hinthorne & Schneider, 2012).

Similarly, Koeners and Francis (2020) identified some critical areas of play physiology, which are relevant for an education setting. These included physical and mental resilience, social intelligence, cognitive flexibility and intellect. Further studies exploring the role play and playfulness have within health suggest a correlation with health behaviours (McCusker, 2020). This is important when considering the role these behaviours can play in combating mental health issues, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused mental health issues in one-fifth of people, with one-third of the population experiencing isolation (Hall, 2022; Kellaway, 2022). Research has shown that mindful development of personal philosophies and associated practices can also have positive impact upon enhanced happiness and satisfaction, mental and physical wellbeing and offer therapeutic benefits (Schottelkorb et al., 2015).

The Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) method

The Lego® Serious Play® method is one where ‘participants use Lego blocks as mediating artefacts to build symbolic or metaphorical representations of abstract concepts’ (McCusker, 2014, p. 27). Individuals build metaphoric structures with Lego® bricks in a relatively brief time, and in response to questions or prompts posed by the facilitator and develop story telling narratives to explain them (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). As such, these individual thoughts and ideas can be shared through a physical representation, and this will stimulate rich discussion with other workshop participants. Henderson and Shipway (2022) identify that the LSP method was primarily developed to respond to the need for systems that support creativity and imagination for innovative dynamic business strategies and generate more engagement, imagination and playfulness in staff meetings (A. R. James, 2013).

The Lego® Serious Play® methodology is based on four central pillars (i) the use of *metaphors*; (ii) underpinned by the concept of *play*, (iii) theory of *flow*; and (iv) *constructivism*. LSP applies these concepts to support learning through exploration and metaphorical explanations of realities, in this case within an education setting. A successful Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) workshop will create and

maintain an atmosphere of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), characterised as a state of effortless achieved through a balance of skill and challenge. McCusker and Swan (2018) propose that the intertwining and underlying sense of challenge, fantasy (through playfulness) and creativity are engendered to recreate the environments, which are essential for creating immersive playful environments. In doing so, they argue that this supports the effortless engagement associated with flow.

Previous early education scholars also considered the application of LSP as a teaching tool with studies reporting improvement in student productivity, engagement, participation, knowledge co-creation and knowledge retention (A. R. James, 2013; McCusker, 2014; Peabody, 2015). Perhaps one of the key things about the use of LSP is the simple fact the process uses visual, auditory, kinaesthetic learning (Blair, 2021) so it is inclusive within the domain of learning styles faced in an education context. It has been proposed that LSP can increase the ‘collision’ of ideas, build empathetic perspective taking, and help facilitate creative problem solving (Johnson, 2010). McCusker (2020) indicated that previous studies by educators were often within higher education (HE) environments and debated whether some earlier scholars felt younger children are less adept at the use of metaphor, as required by the LSP process. Revisiting this observation forms part of this study.

Mental health and wellbeing for Children and Young People (CYP) in educational settings

Gennings et al. (2022) explored children and young people’s (CYP) accounts of the importance of leisure activities for supporting health and wellbeing, and the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic. They highlighted and built upon the call by Holt and Murray (2021) for further research addressing the impact of the pandemic upon the leisure experience of children and young people. This study aims to further support this call to action.

Kellaway (2022) highlighted the number of young people with a ‘probable mental disorder’ in England had increased from one in nine before the COVID-19 pandemic to one in six. She identified that a record 422,000 children were treated for mental health problems, with significant increases in children treated for severe mental health crises, such as suicidal thoughts, eating disorders and self-harm. Similarly, a poll of educational professionals in the UK by Place2Be and the NAHT (National Association of Head Teachers) revealed the lasting impact of the pandemic in schools (Be, 2022). Staff detailed the prevalence of pupil mental health issues including increased levels of low self-esteem, depression, and feelings of anger. Globally, health systems continue struggling to cope with these demands.

Hall (2022) indicated that children had experienced significant disruption in their lives, missing out on social, academic and personal milestones, leaving them feeling grief, loss, uncertainty and a lack of confidence. She highlighted that young people felt powerless and overwhelmed living in an anxiety-induced era. Through social media, young people are now more connected with global events and often feel out of control of their own lives. Pupil mental health is a top priority within school and there is urgency for specialist support and additional resources to help minimise the negative impact on pupils’ ability to engage in learning and school life (Be, 2022). With embedded support, including initiatives such as Lego® Serious Play®, schools are an ideal location to address issues at an early stage, and promote positive mental health as part of the solution.

A. James and Brookfield (2014) argue that LSP embraces the learning philosophy of education through affiliations with both *constructivism* (Piaget, 1954) and the theory of building knowledge structures, and *constructionist* pedagogy (Papert & Harel, 1991). This calls for ‘everything to be understood by being constructed’, as opposed to the ‘instructionist’ models of school-based teaching. This study seeks to understand mental health and the developing minds of young people aged between seven and eleven (Shipway et al., 2022) within educational settings.

There is a degree of irony that the development and application of LSP has been successful in business environments, whilst underutilised in the domain of education (McCusker, 2014; Peabody, 2015), and that the basis for LSP whilst highly influenced by

pedagogical theories and practice, is yet to be embraced by the education community. A controversial interpretation for LSP being underutilised amongst young people in schools could be that empowering pupils does not align with educational systems and organisations. Finally, with the rapid onset of technology within education, at all stages, it has been argued that deep learning is often superficial and rushed (Shipway et al., 2022), and that LSP applied within a school setting provides the purpose and potential impact for a child to reflect on their own learning. It can re-energise engagement and enable pupils to deepen their insights and help manage any existing or potential anxieties that might emerge within an educational setting.

3. Research methodology

A phenomenological research approach and Lego® creativity

This research study adopts a creative methodology, bringing together Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) and mental health and wellbeing outcomes for children, within an educational setting. A phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2003) was used to enable children who had experienced the LSP phenomenon to describe their thoughts and feelings about the experience. Phenomenology is a philosophy of experience and the study of ‘phenomena’ (Jones, 2022). It can uncover the meanings and values that people put on a phenomenon through the objective exploration of topics that are normally seen as subjective, such as perceptions and emotions. Holloway and Galvin (2016) indicate that phenomenology can disrupt positivist perspectives of human behaviour and give preference to a more curious and inquisitive approach to how we interpret the world. Phenomenology provides a suitable paradigm for utilising creative methodologies and particularly for the scrutiny of Lego® Serious Play® (LSP). As such, the underlying aim of this research is to generate new knowledge through the creative interdisciplinary approach of using Lego® Serious Play® (LSP), which brings together multiple social, economic and medical perspectives on communication and learning.

Wengel et al. (2021) indicate that challenges remain for researchers seeking tools that allow participant-driven understandings and co-created knowledge. They argue that traditional qualitative methods, including interviews and focus groups, do not capture the co-construction of the participants’ realities or address the impact of wider social dynamics. Likewise, McCusker (2020) proposes that more traditional data collection tools typically see interactions as merely facilitating talk-based content rather than collaborations for learning. The approach adopted in this study echoes these calls to allow tacit ‘hidden’ experiences and knowledge to be communicated through the application of a more creative research method tool, Lego® Serious Play® (LSP), within educational settings. It helps to stimulate new awareness of ‘reality’ and provides deeper metaphorical meanings and depth of participants’ lived experiences, which are not captured by alternative methods (Wengel et al., 2016).

This study facilitates engagement of children based on a ‘state of flow’, using the components of concentration, interest and enjoyment derived from the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990). This enhances the experience of the Lego® session, engagement, quality, and outputs (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). Whilst much has been written in an educational and cultural context about the state of flow, it is also evident in leisure studies (Elkington, 2011; Lee et al., 2016). The contribution of this methodology is to provide a creative approach to enable young people to be in a ‘state of flow’, using LSP, and then use this sustainably within activity choices to improve and enhance the wellbeing and mental health of children. There is also scope for scalable research and for this approach to be replicated in a diverse range of settings, to help mental health and wellbeing more generally. In doing so, we will advocate and illustrate ‘real-world’ opportunities for building capability through methodological creativity.

Research sample and method of analysis

Collecting data within a school setting was also an opportunity to provide evidence of (inter) professional learning and collaborative work for a diverse range of school-based stakeholders involved in initiatives aimed at supporting and enhancing the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils (Shipway et al., 2022). A Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) workshop generates a non-hierarchical and collaborative environment where children interact playfully, building models in response to challenges set by the facilitator. This ranges from the ‘skills build phase’ to more complex challenges informing collaborative mental health and wellbeing outcomes. LSP can also change the nature of group interactions (McCusker, 2020), and broader holistic outcomes, and the workshops create these outcomes by drawing out pupil ideas and reflections. As such, when using the LSP technique, the methodological creativity is not the Lego® per se but using Lego® as the tool to deliver bottom-up mental health and wellbeing outcomes, which are pupil led.

As previously highlighted, the delivery of Lego® Serious Play® workshops in educational/school settings provides a space whereby deep learning can happen, a ‘state of flow’ occurs (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), to facilitate positive emotions (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007), generate ideas, and help with emotional regulation, positivity, and enhancing adolescent well-being. As a direct result of workshop outcomes, the teachers, in conjunction with the pupils can then determine the collaborative next steps to sustainably improve their wellbeing. This will initiate, what we have now termed, ‘*Lego Leisure Pathways*’ into further leisure-based activities of their choice that stimulate ‘a state of flow’. These future pathway activities could be sporting, arts or culturally based, and fundamentally rooted within the leisure sector (Shipway et al., 2022). These pathways and initiatives could be supported by links to the relevant non-governmental organisations (NGOs), national governing bodies of sport (NGB) local infrastructure, or engagement with a whole host of alternative public, private or voluntary sector leisure organisations and their support services.

The advantage of using a creative methodology like LSP is facilitating reflection of actions and wellbeing choices. As highlighted above, the creative methodology outlined is not Lego® per se but opportunities to use it as the tool to deliver bottom-up mental health and well-being outcomes, which are adolescent led (Shipway et al., 2022). Creatively, the use of Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) will also allow mental health to be openly discussed. In doing so this can support efforts to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues and help provide skills for prevention of and early intervention for mental health. This can be achieved through the active engagement with an everyday leisure activity, Lego®.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected on the 27th and 28th June 2022 in a Southwest of England Junior school. The Junior school is a UK state school for boys and girls, with approximately 700 pupils aged between seven and eleven. Participating pupils came from all four age groups (year 3–6) which were the year groups directly affected by the transition process. During each 55-minute session, pupils were asked to complete four tasks, which aligned with the Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) methodology. Sixty-four pupils took part over the two-day period with four class groups of sixteen students addressing ‘transition’ related issues linked to their anxieties surrounding movement between schools and year groups (Shipway et al., 2022). The pupils were all given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Recruitment and promotion of the workshops was led by the junior school assistant head teacher and year group teachers, with all the required information and consent documentation sent home and signed by parents. This documentation included participant agreement forms and information sheets for both parents and teachers, with modified information sheets and assent form distributed to each pupil to help illustrate the aims of the workshop (Shipway et al., 2022). Completing the workshop session within the school, in a natural and familiar setting, allowed for informal observations of actions and interactions with the Lego®. Both authors led and delivered the

workshops, with support from both the assistant head teacher and several teaching assistants (TAs) who were available to help guide and support pupils. A pre-briefing session was held for all non-Lego® accredited participants to ensure they were confident and aware of the theoretical basis for the Lego® Serious Play® approach. Their commitment to the process was an essential requirement. This procedure was different for the children, who had a clearer focus upon the play component of the workshop from the outset.

For the purpose of the workshop, the structure of the 55-minute children session was split into four component parts underpinned by the LSP skills build and a core session build. This included children being guided by the following instructions and tasks: *1 Technical Build*: build a model of a free-standing Tower [3 min]; *2 Brick Metaphor*: build something that reflects your ‘favourite thing’, which might include places, food or pets [1 min]; *3 Story Telling*: build a model of what worries you about changing classes at school [5 mins]; and *4 Outcome Build*: build a model of something that would make changing classes or school better [5 mins].

McCusker (2014) proposes four very basic guidelines for participants (i) trust your hands; (ii) trust the process; (iii) everybody builds; and (iv) everybody takes part. In addition to this, it was emphasised to the children that there were no wrong answers. Their response to the build was their answer, which ensured that any apprehension about undertaking the task was reduced (Blair, 2021). Each child was given a similar pack of Windows Explorer Lego®, as displayed in Figure 1. Blair (2021) identified that alternative options are available for sessions of this kind ranging from (i) Lego® Identity and Landscape kits; (ii) Lego® Windows exploration bags; or (iii) Lego® soup (a mixture of classic, technic and Duplo). In the wake of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the use of pre-packaged bags of Lego® Window Explorer kits were considered the most hygienic option (Shipway et al., 2022). However, the uniformity of the packs also served to illustrate the creativity and diversity of ‘builds’ which the children created.

The emphasis of the workshop was upon sharing, with the focus upon the Lego® model rather than the individual child. This created a level playing field with each child having an equal voice and ownership of the meaning of their build. There is an iterative process whereby each build supports reflection. The first two ‘builds’ were essentially ‘warm up exercises’ for the children, to ensure they were both confident and comfortable with the activities. Each build was followed by a period of class



Figure 1. A standardised Lego® window explorer pack.

discussion among the cohort of sixteen pupils and teachers/workshop facilitators. The children were able to assign symbolic significance to the models and that the symbolism belonged to the builder (the child). The second build allowed the children to start building 'identity' models, as they became more comfortable with the process. At that stage, the emphasis then progressed and moved towards the final two questions to enable the storytelling narratives to develop. This was to investigate the main aim of the project and unravel two key questions linked to pupil anxieties surrounding the school transition process. These questions were (i) what worried children about the transition to a new school year or new school, and (ii) what the school and teachers could do to make the transition experience less scary and worrying. As the workshop progressed, the children were given the opportunities to develop new models or to modify existing models (build three and four), which added both richness to their meaning and an ability to express deeper insights (McCusker, 2014). The underlying emphasis was to follow a four-stage process (i) *Challenge*; (ii) *Build*; (iii) *Share*; and (iv) *Reflect*.

Qualitative data analysis techniques and procedures were then applied. Thematic analysis has been described as well suited for qualitative research within the field of health and wellbeing (Gennings et al., 2022; Holloway & Galvin, 2016). This approach was chosen because it is consistent with a social constructivist paradigm. This creative methodology entails similar critiques and limitations of a constructivist paradigm, including lack of generalisability and replicability of the data (Wengel et al., 2021). However, the structured workshop process allowed pupils to test ideas and perspectives without fear of saying something wrong, and in a relatively small sample it enabled common themes to emerge. In this instance, codes were driven by the data (extracted from both the models built and the written comments on blank flash cards). The use of blank flash cards, where pupils could further articulate their thoughts, meanings, values and perceptions were particularly helpful for supporting analysis of the data and adding additional detail on the meaning of the bricks and the models, which were constructed. The cards were collected after the workshops and thematically analysed. The role of the two authors was to co-create, whilst minimising bias from their own experiences of working within the education sector. Several rounds of comments, revisions and discussions between the authors and gatekeeper assistant head teacher was employed to finalise a set of reconciled codes, key themes and sub themes (Jones, 2022). There now follows both the pictorial and textual outcomes of the workshops.

4. Results and discussion

As is standard practice in qualitative studies (Holloway & Galvin, 2016; Jones, 2022), the results and discussions are integrated. The preliminary results highlighted four key overarching themes from the data, both models and written comments, all of which were embedded within the student responses to the main questions posed (questions 3 and 4). The key 4P's themes for managing the school transition process, both inter-linked and overarching, focused upon (i) **Places** (negotiating the everyday spaces and places within a school setting); (ii) **Pathways** (navigating the complexities of the transition process); (iii) **Programming** (pupil concerns about the school curriculum and activities); and (iv) **People** (the centrality and importance of peer friendships and teachers). The themes highlighted in Figure 2 have some synergies with the findings of Bagnall et al. (2020) who identified three core themes within the school transition process (i) recognition of emotions, (ii) managing relationships, and (iii) managing expectations.

There was a high degree of overlap and interaction between the key themes emerging from the data, which will now be discussed and illustrated within the context of the main questions which were posed to the children. This process of a linear presentation and debate will help illustrate the flow, development, synergies and contrasting emergence of key issues across the four different year groups (years 3,4, 5 and 6, respectively, with pupils ranging from 7 to 11 years of age). A more detailed exploration of these 4 key themes is beyond the scope and proposed direction of this paper; however, this analysis is presented elsewhere (Shipway et al., 2022). The data presented here were logical as they

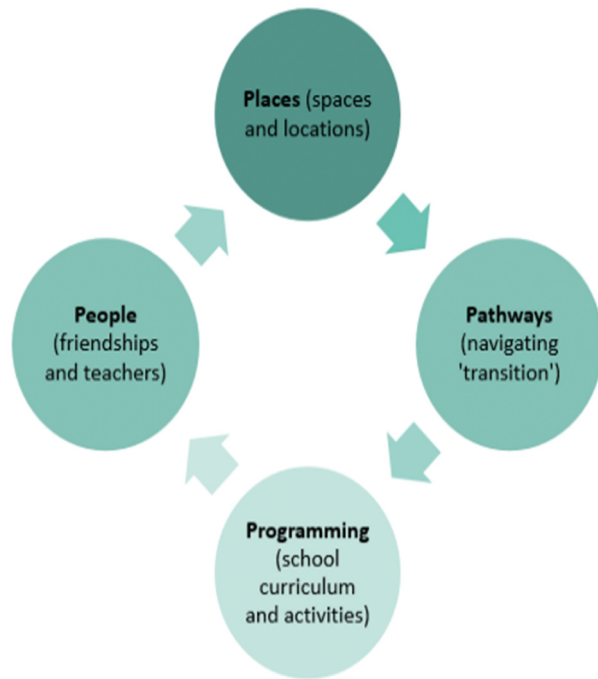


Figure 2. The 4P's for managing the school transition process.
Lego® Minifigure Image: Lego® Detective Character Minifigure

aligned with the questions posed and highlight the development in pupil perspectives. They also allow for the identification of primary and secondary interventions within the school setting as a direct outcome of the data collection.

The following results and discussions will focus on three key areas (i) exploring underlying child transition worries; (ii) opportunities to better manage the transition process for children, and (iii) short-term tactics and strategies to optimise the transition process, whilst also interlinking to the overarching 4Ps for managing the school transition process, which emerged from the primary data.

Exploring underlying child transition worries

The first, targeted question, focused upon the main subject area under investigation and asked the children *'what are your worries about transfer day, and the transition to the new school year?* This question elicited a diverse range of responses from the cohorts. The comments all aligned with four overarching and recurring themes, as introduced in [Figure 1](#), linked to *places, people, programmes and pathways* of the school transition process.

In Year 3, classroom places and locations were of particular concern. Sally expressed concerns about the set-up of her classroom, noting *'I am worried about where I sit because I feel like my last teacher would never pick me at the back, but at the front, she would pick me'*. This perspective resonated with Dylan who observed *'I have never sat at the front. It would be easier at the front because I am dyslexic, and I could talk the teacher far easier, if I am stuck'*. However, for some children, the whole process of transition was somewhat overwhelming and all consuming, as Amy commented *'I feel like the whole world is falling on me'*.

The qualitative narratives throughout were established using the process of jointly building the model and in conjunction by explaining the model both verbally to the teachers and LSP facilitators before writing the context and detail on the comment cards provided, which was subsequently used

for data analysis. In Year 4, for Anthony, a concern was about how he was perceived, when he explained *'I am worried about making a good impression'*. For Delilah, the main concerns were two-fold, when she stated *'I'm worried about teachers shouting and having no friends'*. These comments reinforced the importance of maintaining and creating friendships and networks within school, which was confirmed by the findings of Shipway et al. (2022) in their pilot study on the educational value of Lego® in a junior school setting. Some of these comments and builds are visible in Figure 3.

Several children in the higher year groups (years 5 and 6) were quite self-conscious about how they were perceived by their peers. Kyle, from Year 5, mentioned that *'I don't like everyone looking at me and laughing – it makes me feel uncomfortable'*. The theme of organisation and places was once again prevalent in these year groups, as Rhianna highlighted *'I want to know how the classroom will be organised, as I might not know where everything is'*. For several, the tensions surrounding the ongoing war in Ukraine were of concern to some pupils, which appeared to spill over into the curriculum for the following year. Alfie commented that he was *'worried about learning about the wars, World War 1 and World War 2, and I'm also nervous about some of the school trips'*.

The final year pupils in Year 6 expressed their concerns with regards to transitioning from the junior school environment into a new school. As background context, in the UK's state school sector pupils progress from junior school to secondary school when they complete Year 6 at approximately eleven years of age. Some reservations related to fear of bullying and the threat of verbal nastiness within a new school environment. This confirmed the findings of Shipway et al. (2022) on the central importance of place, space and location for pupils as an integral element of the transition process. Jonah explained *'I am worried about bullying and that the new children won't be very nice'*. For some, it was the fear of the unknown with regards to learning and the school curriculum and subjects, as Tommy mentioned *'I'm worried about getting into trouble with my work'*. Other pupils who were clearly unfamiliar with their future new environments expressed concerns like Maddie, who was worried about getting lost in a larger school setting. She built two boats with her Lego®, stating she was worried about *'feeling like a little boat in the middle of a big ocean'*. The flash card narratives demonstrated the centrality of using metaphors to shape and describe the models. Maddie had further described her model as a *'little boat where we can sail away'*

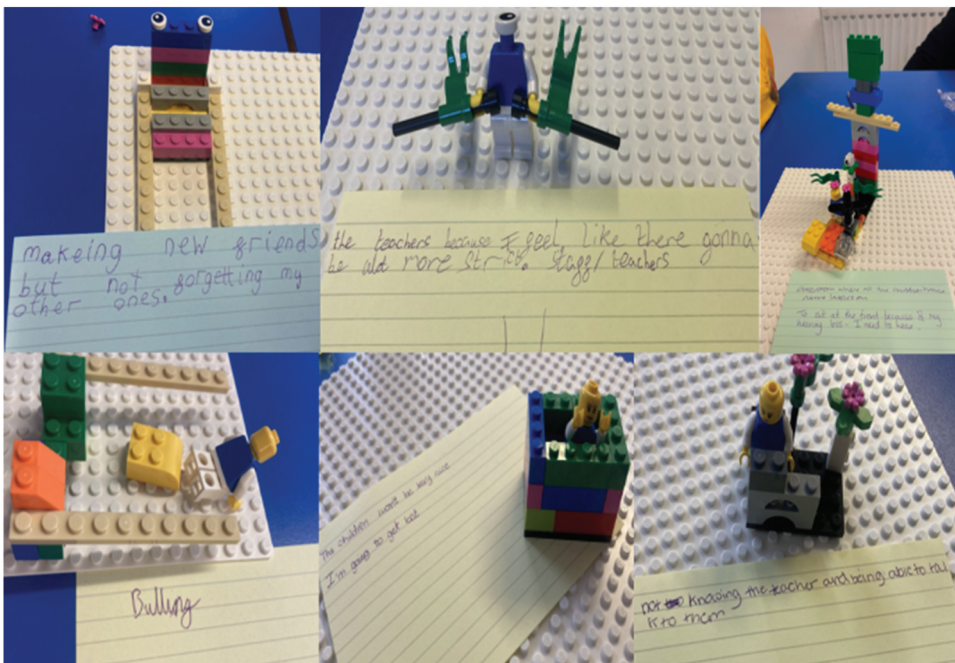


Figure 3. Lego® builds and reflections (i): Pupil worries and concerns.

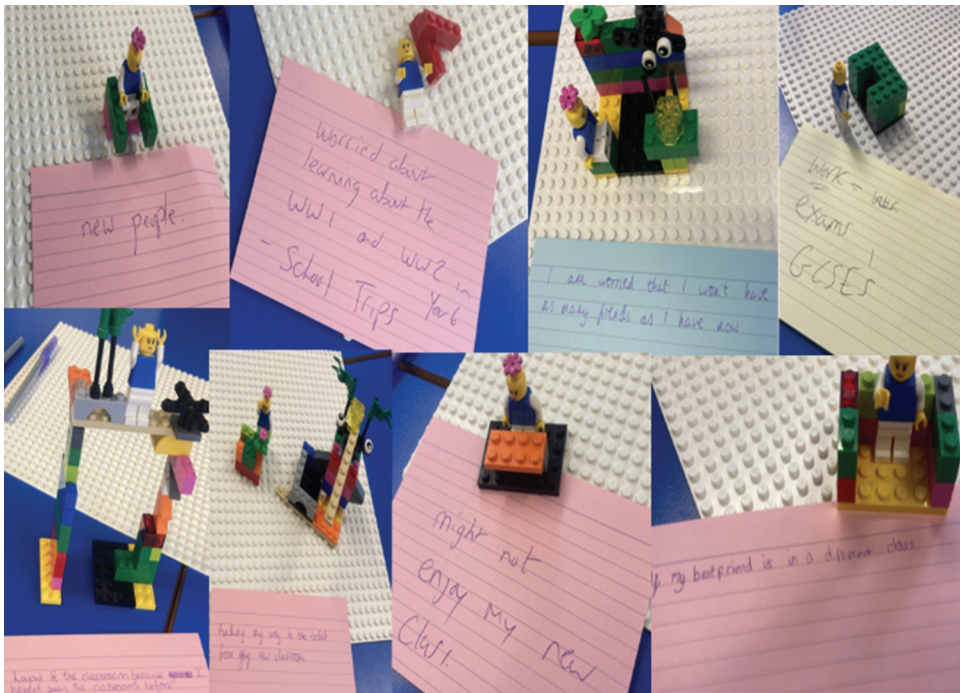


Figure 4. Lego® builds and reflections (ii): Pupil worries and concerns.

from learning'; the metaphor being 'little boat' and 'sailing away'. This illustrated metaphorical aspects and the possibilities imagined through a 'generative metaphor', enabling children to frame their thinking without being restricted (McCusker, 2020).

School transition can be an emotional experience for pupils as they manage emotions, relationships and expectations (Bagnall et al., 2020). Multiple discontinuities can cause varying degrees of anxiety and apprehension. Lucy and Reay (2000, p.198) refer to the 'horror stories and myths' amongst pupils surrounding the process. It is a phase in the lives of young people in contemporary society that carries more 'risk' than for previous generations (Beck, 1992). The findings illustrate that Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) provides a tool to help better understand and support the transition period for both young people and teachers as it can evoke honest and more in-depth insight (Figures 3–7).

Opportunities to better manage the transition process for children

The fourth and final question, building on question three, focused upon strategies to better manage the transition process for children, and posed the specific question 'what could we (teachers and the school) do to make the transition experience less scary and worrying for you?' The aim of this final question was to explore potential solutions and remedies to mitigate against children's anxiety relating to the transition process within the everyday school environment. Once again, pupils were asked to consider the question, build a model, discuss the model with the facilitators, and write comments aligned with the theme and the model on the blank flash cards provided.

Responses from Year 3 pupils were diverse, ranging from Noah who simply wanted 'my teacher to wear a hat, as it makes me happy. Also, it would be really nice if she had a pet'. More realistic and practical, Jonah simply requested that he 'could sit on the same table as my friend'. For Josephine, it was important 'to have more outside activities in the first week(s) and play outside doing something fun, and to sit under a tree and do some colouring'. The models built by the children visually reflected these observations and re-confirmed the important and central role of both teachers and peer friendship (Shipway et al., 2022).



Figure 5. Lego® builds and reflections: Remedies and solutions (1).

The theme of a class pet also resonated with Year 4 pupils, like Marie who explained ‘*we need class pets in each class – probably dogs or rabbits or maybe even a tortoise or hamster*’. This was most probably due to the school having a school dog, and this idea appeared to have permeated downwards. From a school programming perspective, several children felt their anxieties might be reduced with the inclusion and frequency of existing activities and initiatives. Anthony suggested ‘*more Stormbreaks*’, which is an existing physical activity and student wellbeing initiative within the local schools, whilst Delilah felt she would benefit from ‘*having time to think between lessons*’. Aligned to the pilot study findings from Shipway et al. (2022), the theme of space, place and location was prevalent within the proposed remedies, with Xavier requesting ‘*I want to sit at the back of the class, although I always sit at the front, because I wear glasses*’.

Whilst the themes in Year 5 and 6 were consistent with the earlier year groups, some more practical solutions were often proposed. For the first week of term, Alex proposed ‘*a classroom where all the children have name labels on*’, whilst Leonie was more concerned about addressing practical issues relevant to her specifically, when noting ‘*I want my teachers to know that I have a wobble cushion*’. From an organisational perspective, Letitia mentioned that ‘*I would like to sit next to a girl. I can’t sit with boys. Boys hurt me in Year 4 and called me mean names. It is easier with girls – less stress*’.

The practical remedies and solutions continued with the Year 6 pupils. Jonah was eager to focus on his schoolwork and asked for his new teachers ‘*not to ask me how my weekend was, when I have just got into school mood*’. In contrast, Tommy expressed a preference for accessing existing networks, stressing the importance of ‘*being able to talk to the pastoral care worker, like Ms X*’. The spatial theme was also important for Maddie who highlighted a desire to ‘*go outside into a big space and interact with other children and my friends. Going into a big space makes me feel calmer because I don’t like being in small spaces*’.



Figure 6. Lego® builds and reflections: Remedies and solutions (2).

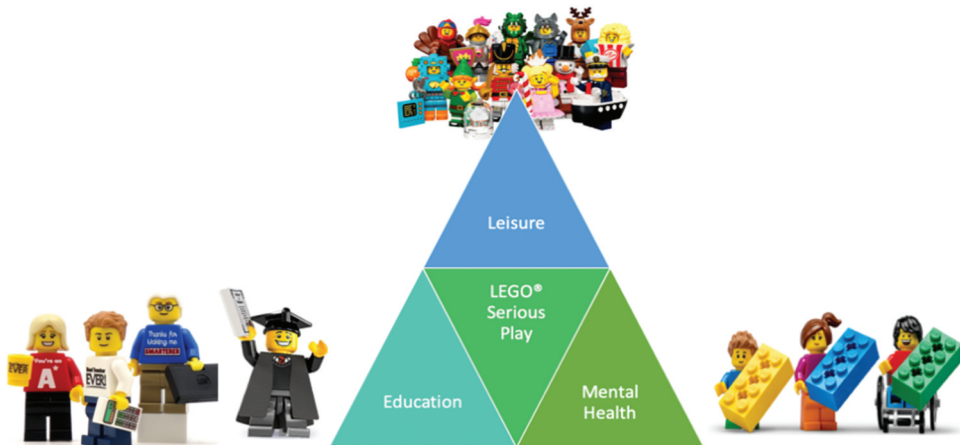


Figure 7. Lego® and the interaction of leisure, education and mental health and wellbeing.

Lego® Minifigure Image: Lego® Series 23 Group Image Minifigure

Lego® Minifigure Image: Lego® Graduate Character Minifigure

Lego® Minifigure Image: Lego® inclusion and Diversity Minifigures

Current educational systems would benefit from adopting creative approaches like Lego® Serious Play® which have the potential to address complex societal mental health, equality, inclusion and diversity challenges (Kellaway, 2022). The findings reinforce the perspectives of both Lucy and Reay (2000) on the anxieties involved in having to negotiate afresh informal spaces and new geographical horizons including new classrooms, new social spaces, and in some cases, new schools as spaces of contestation.

Short-term tactics and strategies to optimise the transition process

Following the data analysis, it was subsequently possible to craft detailed feedback for school staff to help better manage future transfer and transition programmes for children. Recognising school transition as a site of potential conflict for children and introducing measures such as Lego® Serious Play® (LSP), to help make it a smoother one, entails the kind of reflexivity that Giddens (1991) described as characteristic of contemporary life. A series of proposed practical implications include (i) photos of the new year teaching team to inform children whose class they will be in; (ii) a photo of where children will meet their new teacher; (iii) inclusion of a *Stormbreak* (physical activity) session; (iv) provide focus for children getting to know each other and making new friends; (v) outdoor activities where children are able to ‘do things outside’; (vi) opportunities for children to share stories about their feelings towards school transition and how they feel about starting a new year group, to help normalise the process and support some children to feel less isolated. These findings, emerging from the primary data collected, have a close synergy with the preliminary findings from Shipway, Shipway et al. (2022) pilot study, which explored the use of Lego® to support junior school mental health and wellbeing initiatives.

On a practitioner level, the results were able to support additional education recommendations including (vii) teachers sharing their own stories of their first days at school or in a new class and reading stories about the first days; (viii) explaining to pupils the opportunities within the day/week when they could meet up with their current friends; (ix) suggesting meeting places where pupils could arrange to meet their friends at the commencement of break, lunch or play periods; and (x) the completion of an ‘ideal school’ activity and to include an ‘ideal classroom’ section where they indicate where they might like to be seated, and why. Again, these practitioner-based solutions have a close synergy with the recommendations proposed by Shipway et al. (2022). Aligned to the findings of Lucy and Reay (2000, p. 194), we have also observed ‘tinges of optimism’ in the children’s narratives and their creative engagement with Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) and the subsequent outcomes.

5. Conclusions

In the leisure context, this study contributes to knowledge by using Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) to highlight the unique interaction between leisure, education and mental health and wellbeing. From the outset, it should be noted that the level of engagement with previous scholars linked to Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) and leisure reflects the paucity of studies in the field amongst children and young people and the interaction between leisure, education and mental health and wellbeing. Whilst studies exist in the context of young people in higher age groups (Jensen et al., 2018; Koeners & Francis, 2020; McCusker, 2014), there are minimal, if any studies amongst younger children. It is hoped the findings from this study contribute towards establishing an initial platform for future leisure studies in this domain.

Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) facilitated opportunities for investigating different perspectives of young people to consider issues surrounding anxiety and exploring solutions between teacher and pupil. The findings propose that a gentle, playful, multi-sensory LSP approach can provide mental health benefits to teachers and children alike (Reeve, 2021). Wengel et al. (2021) also emphasised the importance of visuals, metaphors and adopting a ‘playful approach’. Crucially, certain sensitive topics surrounding mental health that young people might have been reluctant to discuss, especially in front of class peers, were explored in this creative, playful process. The findings reaffirm perspectives of Reeve (2021) on the importance of providing spaces within schools for children and educators to explore challenges, to develop empathy, and support their mental health.

It is important to consider whether similar outcomes could have been achieved using other forms of leisure or play aside of Lego® Serious Play®. Any medium, which allows children to express their understandings, and which encourages play, sharing, flow and reflection would be suitable.

However, Lego® is a particularly familiar and comfortable system, eliciting emotional responses, feelings of excitement and nostalgia when first introduced to workshop participants. These feelings then effectively ‘open the door for play’, as advocated by McCusker (2014). Play allowed the children to view familiar problems in a new way and to create a safe space for exploring possible solutions (Hinthorne & Schneider, 2012). Importantly, the Lego® bricks require limited technical expertise and the models are not characterised by their technical qualities, rather by what they represent to the children. Ultimately, the use of pen and paper are two-dimensional and do not provide the same close connection for the child as Lego®, which makes children smile and want to play. The richness is not so much in the Lego® bricks but in what they represent to the children, and it is the sharing and the process of reflection of Lego® Serious Play® that allows deep insight.

The findings contribute to existing knowledge by utilising Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) to move researchers towards a more creative and participatory methodology that embeds the participants’ voice in the co-created data. Wengel et al. (2021) indicated that it can promote critical, reflective dialogue around the topic. Aligned with the foundational perspective of Kirsch (1999), the use of LSP as a creative methodology in educational settings provides a tool that can help facilitate voice, trust and relationship dynamics between pupil and teacher. As a constructionist technique, Lego® Serious Play® offers a valuable creative methodology for leisure researchers to develop deeper explorations of socially constructed education-based realities that are both complex and often sensitive (Wengel et al., 2016). Additionally, as a visual method, it also provides insights into participants’ imaginations and conceptual understandings of leisure and educational situations and relationships.

In terms of recommendations for future research and education practitioner-based activities, there is significant potential for adopting this creative LSP methodology as a leisure activity and exercise in a range of alternative education settings and expanding the scope of the project (Shipway et al., 2022). These opportunities include (i) interactive workshops and roadshows (within sport, art and community-based settings) across schools and community spaces; (ii) development of a well-being computer/phone app for young people to support mental health; (iii) a child mentoring scheme within schools; (iv) enhanced networking with mental health agencies and education institutions to disseminate and broaden the profile and reach; (v) optimising support for high profile Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) project ambassadors from throughout the sport, art and cultural sectors, within school settings; and (vi) using Lego® and Leisure outcomes to help guide children and facilitate pathways to additional leisure, sport, art or culture activities to help support their mental health and wellbeing.

One limitation of the study is the focus upon seven to eleven-year-old children. However, there is clear scope for future studies linked to adolescents in the age range of ten to twenty-four, and in other ‘transition’ contexts. For adolescents, the transition from education into the workplace and those early career years can bring intense change and new challenges. As such, we advocate future studies, which both diversify the age ranges investigated and transition scenarios and environments. There is scope exploring adolescent transition to (i) college/university and (ii) to the workplace, and (iii) to consider implementing projects with younger five- or six-year-old ‘primary’ school children, managing their transition movement. This scoping project has identified that the Lego® Serious Play® (LSP) methodology elicits results and rich data findings amongst young people. One forthcoming challenge would be to explore whether primary school children might be too young to engage, or whether they would thrive through a leisure-based ‘Power of Play’ approach?

As a caveat, it should be noted that Lego® is relatively expensive and time-consuming when compared to more traditional and less innovative approaches such as class discussions or written class-based exercises and activities. Moving forward, it is thus important for future approaches, using a leisure tool like Lego®, to demonstrate that it can elicit richer information than other current educational approaches.

There are managerial and policy implications for the educational sector linked to these findings. The results identify the unique interaction between leisure, mental health and education, which can

emerge from the use of Lego® Serious Play® (Shipway et al., 2022). The findings demonstrate that the LSP process can be effective in educational contexts where school goals are examined, and opportunities exist for senior management to identify ways of meeting the needs of a school cohort faced with anxieties over the school transition process. As identified in Figure 2, they also identify the importance of people, places, pathways and programmes for future managerial initiatives within the educational sector. Within an educational context, additional work is now required to establish both the value and validity of this creative methodological approach, advocating the case for Lego® Serious Play® as an educational tool. Additionally, there are policy opportunities whereby LSP can be further utilised to help provide ‘wrap around’ services to support mental health for children dealing with post-pandemic challenges. To encourage such initiatives at source, within the school setting, would inevitably save future costs of supporting mental health services that face severe backlogs and financial constraints (Shipway et al., 2022). We propose that Lego® Serious Play® is one approach that helps to partially address this unmet need in the domain of mental health and wellbeing.

The findings indicate Lego® Serious Play® can help children to (re) discover the world and assert their own social identity, whilst also supporting intellectual, communication, emotional and social development, and their sense of self. Importantly, all children reached the ‘flow’ state of effortless engagement (McCusker, 2014) by the time the central focus of the workshop was addressed. The results also highlight how Lego® Serious Play® has the potential to (i) improve well-being for children by introducing playfulness through leisure into their everyday education settings and help them (re) connect; (ii) offer a mechanism for platforming and amplifying diverse voices and perspectives of children within an educational setting, and (iii) allow children to feel comfortable expressing their personal views and lived experiences whilst undertaking a leisure-based activity, especially given the focus is more on the model than on the child.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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