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Children's spaces and places for leisure and play: From Protection to Participation

Susan Pike

Views of children are varied, complex and evolving. Specifically in Ireland, we have broadened views of children over time, from viewing children just as in need of survival and protection to a wider appreciation of the complexities of development and participation rights children. Legislation has moved on to encompass children's capabilities, through their agency and participation, two of our national policy documents are testament to this shift: Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-2020 sets out increased the coordination of the statutory, voluntary and community bodies working with and for children, through interagency activity. The 2015 document, National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making 2015-2020, goes further in allocation departments and agencies to targets for children's participation. These documents are the culmination of years of research with and policy development for children, whilst there is still work to do, children's rights and agency have been advanced.

However, the place of children is contested by themselves and those working with them. The neo-liberal basis of economies and societies, such as Ireland's, mean there are structural economic forces at play in children's lives, and much of what happens to children is beyond their control. From such perspectives and participation of children in decision making is always going to be considered tokenistic. Others views are that despite structural impacts on children's lives, they are able to be social actors, with agency. From these perspectives, children are free to participate in decisions that affect them. A great example of this is children's use of mobile phones. On one hand this means they are subject to the influences of large multinational companies in their daily lives, such as social media, retailers, etc. On the other hand, phones

grant children freedom, as they can wander further from home but still be contacted or tracked by parents using technologies.

Perhaps the varying views of children's lives are in fact, a complex continuum of ideas, and that we need to 'get on' with the business of children and young people's agency and participation in their everyday settings for meaningful change in their lives. With this in mind, we need empirical research and practice examples of children's agency and participation working well, and not so. The articles in this issue contain many such examples. In fact, within the great range of articles presented here, provide insights into children's experiences in terms of structured and unstructured leisure and play times and places. The children are a range of ages from early years through to teenagers. They also have a range of particular characteristics and needs, from children on the Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) spectrum (renamed by O'Sullivan and colleagues as the Autistic Spectrum Difference), to very young children and children living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Within the papers, children featured are also in a range of setting; pre-schools, after-schools, schools as well as in their communities, playing outside.

Rights for leisure and play, with choice

The Growing Up in Ireland survey is our prime example of the increased amount of data available on children's lives, including their leisure and play in Ireland. The project, which needs no introduction here, provides a wealth of data from the longitudinal study. Quite simply, the GUI project tells us so much, but not everything, about our children's lives. The Rokicki and McGovern article, draws on GUI data to consider children's play activities. Their analysis of the data shows complex gender and socio-economic differences that appear to impact on outcomes for children's outcomes. And that these variations will have an impact on children's future in terms of education and well-being. At a micro scale, the role of the educator is apparent, in Vasileva's work on gender and place in early childhood

settings. She shows how educators can make a real difference to the scope of children's play in relation to ideas about girls' and boys' play activities. Variations in what children do is also the case for older children as Kavanagh and Weir, note there are differing patterns of children's unstructured time. Their impressive range of data with a large survey size reveals variations in how children spend their time depending on their families and communities. It seems there are differences in the opportunities for structured and unstructured leisure in different groups of children. Some children spending large amounts of time in structured activity, others spending large amounts of time in unstructured activity. The role of children in deciding how they spend their time is an area now receiving attention. O'Riordan, Horgan, Marin and O'Sullivan draw out the importance of children's choices in how they spend their unstructured time, through creative research strategies with children of all ages. The children's wonderful words and pictures illustrate vividly. All of these papers note we still need to know more about such patterns to try to establish some ideal balances between structured and unstructured time, as well as what activities are carried out in those times.

The O'Riordan article is one of many examples of how children's lives in their daily settings have moved on from ideas of survival and protection. On a weekly basis in teacher education it is evident that in all settings children do have more of a say: they are more likely to make choices about play, learning and activities. A visual example of this is, many education and play settings have now recognised the need to outdoor space, with elements to enable children to make play in spaces their own. Stokes' work is a great example of this, through presenting the children's own words, she illustrates the delight and quality of children's imaginative play. Although, as she shows, children's agency has to be prioritised by adults. When this is the case, results are positive for children's current and future development. Such 'granting' of agency can be a challenge, this is especially the case for children on the ASD spectrum. Sexton's research,

in a range of settings, illustrates how choice and autonomy had a positive impact on children's experiences. Crucially, children had opportunities in outdoor settings that were not possible indoors, and that such play was powerful in many ways. Sexton also notes how such play was easier in education settings because of the possible and actual expectations of strangers in more public settings. Sexton's work shows the importance of play for all, not just those working with children within the ASD spectrums, to maximise the affordances of play for children.

Drawing on children's ideas about their leisure time is particularly important for children on the ASD, but it can be a challenge too, especially when children have different ways of communicating. An example of this is found in two more of the articles relating to children on the ASD spectrum. In fact, differences are noted by O'Sullivan, Ring and Horgan as they reword ASD to the Autistic Spectrum Difference (ASD) spectrum. The children they worked with had particular needs in relation to play, but shared the wish to have agency in their play choices with their 'mainstream' children. Such choice in play is the case for older children as described in Cross's work, focusing on girls on the ASD spectrum. As described, she found the cycle of lacking social and communication skills resulting in anxiety, resulting in increased impairments can be broken by focusing on the strengths of girls with ASD as well as their peers. This focus on what children on the ASD spectrum as well as their 'can do' is again evident, and in this study resulted in enough of a change in the girl's everyday actions to result in a significant improvement in their lives.

Children's agency and participation, indoors and out

The 2015 National Strategy on Children's Participation is our national strategy on children's participation, a first on the international stage. This strategy should ensure children have a voice in decisions about their lives in their communities; in education, on their health and

wellbeing and in legal settings (DCYA, 2015). Containing a set of actions to encourage children's participation in decision-making the strategy states that government departments will consult with children and young people in the development of policy, legislation, research and services. However, as the papers in this digest reveal, much of children's agency and participation is in relation to their everyday lives: playing at home and outside, experiences in school, after school and in other care settings.

Murphy's work across a range of settings found the importance of adults in outdoor play. Crucially, she evidenced that as adults understanding of outdoor play and learning increased, so did the quality of design and use of the outdoor play space. Where there was the combination of children's participation in space making and adult appreciation of the importance of outdoor space for learning, then outdoor spaces were used frequently and in child led but adult enabled environments. Such settings also had better affordances for play, with trees, shrubs and grass. Moore and Lynch note the importance of children's participation in play is their wellbeing, quite simply they argue that children are happier when they make decisions about their play. However, as Cummins, notes there is a lack of guidelines for after school settings in relation to children's role in their play, and notes how this situation can mean restrictions are set upon children. She notes such settings cannot 'free up children and compensate for a society where children's lives are restricted in general. She uses powerful examples, to reveal the power of risky play, and that where children are less restricted their creativity and imagination are opened up.

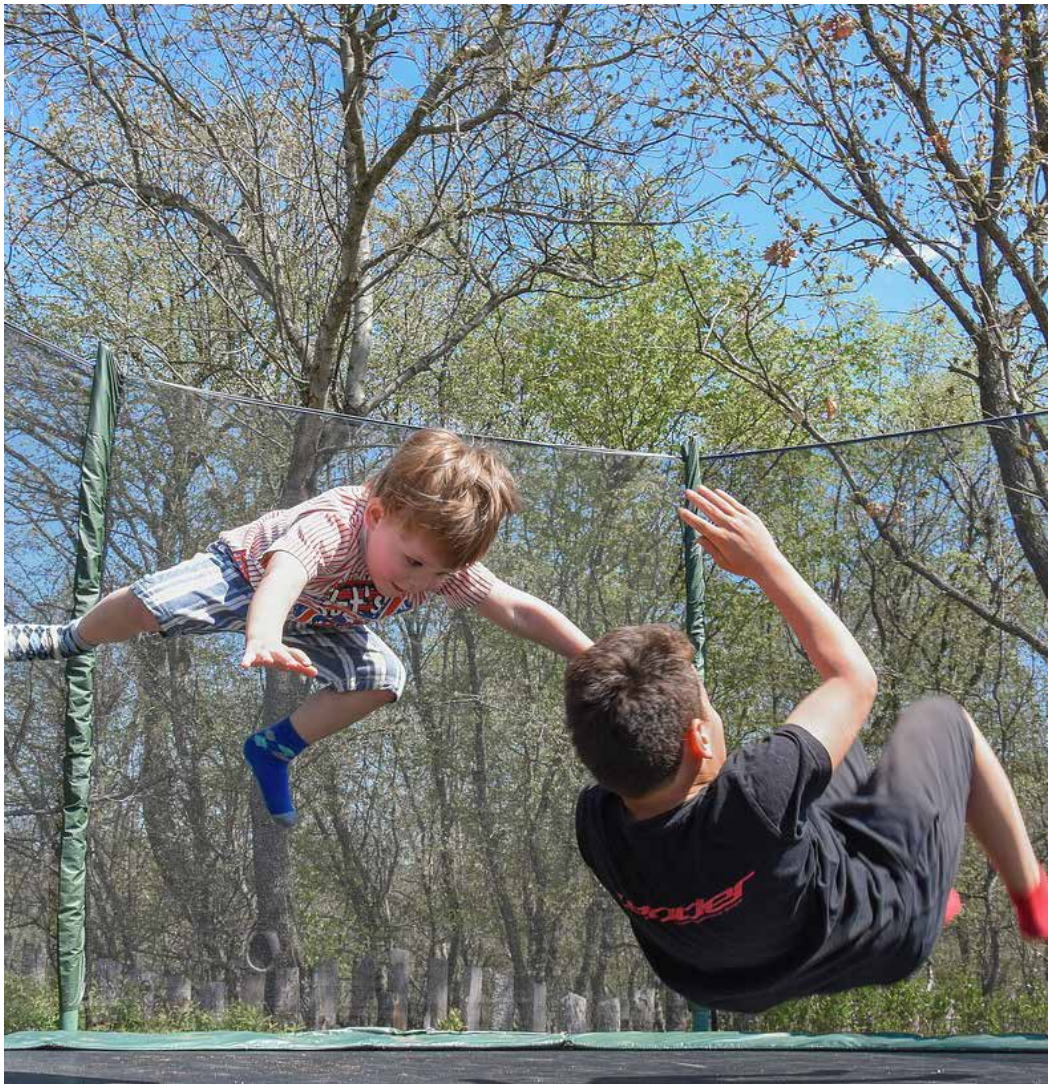
Some of the best examples of children's agency and participation in play tend to be in the outdoors where some fascinating research has taken place, and some great examples of this are within this issue. For example, McAuliffe, Hinchion and Lynch focused on the risky elements of children's play, showing how both the socio-cultural contexts of children's lives and the play spaces themselves impact on children's play.

In her work, once in play spaces it was evident what was valued by children was spaces they could make their own, by being imaginative and 'risky' with unstructured materials. Egan and Pope looked at such affordances in a different way, using the GUI data to reveal some national patterns in neighbourhood play. Again, the idea that to have agency in their play children need to take advantage of affordances of the neighbourhoods, in two ways. Firstly, in what is available to use or modify for play and secondly, crucially for what was permitted. They found chasing and imaginative play were more common than tree climbing, and that barriers to a full range of play, including those created by the adults themselves, must be recognised and resolved. An example for children's agency and participation being enhanced by adults is Murphy's work in Forest Schools, in her study the children explored and experimented with the properties and characteristics of making structures. She found through their designs, making, creativity was evident as well as learning around resilience, responsibility, independence and awareness of the surroundings. She also noted how happy the children were in their achievements. Cagney, Carol and Lynch's work on children's roles on designing play spaces, illustrates how logical it is to involve children in all stages of the provision of play spaces. Such research should provide wonderful example material for the guidelines they suggest for children's participation in designing spaces for them, using the participatory methods such as they developed.

Final thoughts

There is much that draws all of the varied articles in this volume together; children's agency, their participation in decisions and the actions they take. All of this would not be possible without the support of adults who are willing to 'let go' and recognise what children can, rather than cannot do. The articles are testament to the idea that what the forces at play in children's lives, those working for and with them are a force of good in

their lives. By taking time, as that is often what is needed, to listen to children and to act on what they say adults can make a significant difference to children's lives. The articles also indicate how changes in legislation and thinking can ensure children's lives do involve more opportunities for them to act on their agency with and participate in decisions about their lives, in all settings. Despite such provision, the recently launched Ireland 2040, a framework for development for Ireland mentions children just a handful of times, with most of these. It remains the case that in relation to national policy it does seem they are only considered in times of needs, such as early childhood, mental health and early school leaving. Reference to children in their everyday situations, particularly in relation to their roles in decision making about their lives in their communities and schools. This lack of children's voice, agency and action includes their role in decision making about their local environments, the papers in this volume show the importance of listening to children and the power of the process of participation in play and education. The pages within this volume are a treasure trove of what can be for the lives of our young people, whether at home, child care or school. Across the articles the research, whether in large scale national studies or smaller scale qualitative projects, reveals the agency of the youngest citizens of Ireland to be imaginative, creative and playful.



Unequal opportunities for play?

**How children spend
their time in Ireland**

Slawa Rokicki and Mark McGovern

Introduction

The way children spend their time impacts their cognitive and non-cognitive skills (often defined in terms of brain and socio-emotional development, respectively). Play, sports and other prosocial activities promote positive growth by creating opportunities for belonging, helping others, and skill building (Fredricks and Eccles, 2006). Beneficial pastimes can help to foster skills such as the ability to focus on tasks, the ability to work with others, self-regulation, and self-esteem (Posner and Vandell, 1999). Unstructured play time has also been linked to greater self-esteem and resilience (Malone, 2007).

There is substantial evidence documenting socioeconomic status (SES) differences in the developmental resources available to children (Heckman, 2008). Moreover, data point to ever increasing disparities in time spent in skill-promoting activities by parental education (Altintas, 2016; Putnam, 2016; Ramey and Ramey, 2010). Because early life experiences contribute to later outcomes, systematic differences in the extent to which children are able to engage in activities such as play and sports may be contributing to inequality among adults. The present study examines whether children in Ireland from different family backgrounds have the same opportunities to engage in play and other activities using data from the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study. GUI captures diary information that allows for the investigation of how children spend their time from age 9 to age 13.

Literature

Engaging in activities such as play which promote the development of non-cognitive skills during childhood has been shown to be important in later life, contributing to increases in education and wages, as well as improving health. Participation in sports, school-based leadership and spirit activities, and academic clubs is associated with an increased likelihood of being enrolled full-time in college at age 21. Similarly, participation in prosocial activities is

associated with lower rates of alcohol and drug use (Eccles et al., 2003). In particular, when girls participate in sports, they have a higher chance of attending college and being employed (Pfeifer and Cornelißen, 2010; Stevenson, 2010).

Play and engaging in sport can also be important for health in the long run. High levels of physical activity at ages 9 to 12 among Finnish children is associated with increased physical activity when they reach adulthood (Telama, R., Yang, X., Viikari, J., Välimäki, I., Wanne, O. and Raitakari, O. 2005). Evidence from a randomised trial shows that children exposed to stimulating early environments that emphasize development of language, emotional regulation, and cognitive skills have significantly lower prevalence of risk factors for cardiovascular and metabolic diseases in their mid-30s (Campbell et al., 2014).

Other types of play can also be important for both cognitive and non-cognitive development. Some evidence suggests that time spent using a computer (for any reason) at age 5 positively impacts test scores at age 7, while time spent watching television or playing video games has a negative effect on test scores (Fiorini, 2010). Other research suggests that some types of television programme can be beneficial for cognitive skills like reading and mathematics (Wright et al., 2001).

Finally, unstructured time may have benefits too. Independent mobility is associated with increases in physical activity for 10-12 year olds (Page et al., 2010; Wen et al., 2009). Additionally, exposure to risks and challenges without adult supervision may build problem solving skills and resilience (Malone, 2007). Studies have found that a lack of experience of autonomy and independence in childhood may contribute to a lack of self-confidence, self-esteem, anxiety during transitions, and reduced social competence in young adulthood (Lang and Deitz, 1990; Malone, 2007). Finally, unstructured social activities may promote self-discovery and personal expressiveness with peers (Coatsworth et al., 2005).

Data and methods

The nationally representative GUI survey collects time use diary data from children and their parents. The survey comprises two cohorts followed longitudinally, one who were age 9 at baseline in 2007/2008, and another who were age 9 months. In this analysis we focus on the child cohort, which comprises 8,568 nine-year-olds at wave 1. Wave 2 was conducted when the children were aged 13. Both wave 1 and wave 2 captured time use information.

The GUI time use diary recorded details of the activities of participants over a 24-hour period, dividing the day and night into 15-minute intervals. In the first wave, parents were asked to complete the diary with their children (where possible); at the second wave, the 13-year-old children were asked to complete the diary with the help of their parents (if necessary).

The lists of possible activities were not the same across the two waves, therefore in order to compare time use at ages 9 and 13 we consolidated the activities into 12 categories: sleeping, care (which includes eating, traveling, and personal care), school, homework, sport/exercise, unstructured playing time (general play, playing board games or cards, playing with a pet, and hanging out with friends), leisure (hobbies and music lessons), media (which includes watching TV and videos, using the computer/internet, using phones and social media, and listening to music), reading for pleasure, housework, family time (which includes shopping trips and outings), and other (Table 1). This allows us to establish the time spent in activities such as play for the average child, but also to examine whether the time use patterns differ according to family background. In constructing these categories, we were limited by the activities defined in the survey; for example, at age 9 children marked whether they spent time in “physical play/exercise/sports” so there is no way to distinguish physical play on a playground from organised sports. The exact phrasing of the activities provided in the survey is shown in Table 1 for each wave. Further details are described in Rokicki and McGovern (2017).

In this paper, we evaluate the average time spent in sport, reading, using media, and unstructured playing time for girls and boys in wave 1 and wave 2. We examine differences in time use by maternal education, which has been used extensively as a proxy for socio-economic status in the literature on children's development (Hupp et al., 2011; Madden, 2017).

Results

Figure 1 shows the time use pattern for girls. We find important differences by SES (as measured by maternal education) in both the amount of time spent in various activities, as well as the trends over time. Girls at age 9 spend about 50 minutes playing sports each day, without much difference by SES (Figure 1). By age 13, average sports time is reduced dramatically for all girls; however, girls from lower SES backgrounds spend even less time playing sports at age 13 (12 minutes) than their counterparts from higher SES backgrounds (29 minutes). Conversely, for time spent using media, the picture is reversed: all girls increase the time spent using media from age 9 to 13, however children from lower SES backgrounds spend more time on media (108 minutes) than their counterparts (86 minutes) by age 13.

Category	Wave 1 (Age 9)	Wave 2 (Age 13)
Sleeping	Sleeping	Sleeping/Resting
	Resting/relaxing (doing nothing, 'time out')	
Care	Personal care (washing, dressing, toilet)	Personal care or getting ready
	Eating/drinking/having a meal	Eating
	Traveling to and from school	Traveling (to or from school or elsewhere)
	Other traveling	
School	At school	At school
Homework	Homework	Doing homework or study
Sport	Physical play/exercise/ sports (playground, running, chasing, football, judo, ballet, dance)	Playing sport or doing physical exercise (training, matches)
Unstructured playing time	Playing board games, cards, etc	Just hanging around with friends (outside or inside)
	General play (with toys, dolls, cars, dressing up, 'playing house', imaginary/make believe games)	Playing with or exercising a pet
Leisure	Hobbies and other leisure activities (crafts, model making, painting, music practice, etc)	Music Lessons (or practicing music), drama, classes
		Hobbies and other leisure activities
Media	Computer/internet/ playstation/xbox	Using the internet/emailing (including social networking, browsing)
	Email/bebo/msn/texting/ on the phone	Playing computer games
	Watching tv and videos/ dvds etc	Talking on the phone or texting
		Watching tv, films, videos, or dvds
		Listening to music

Category	Wave 1 (Age 9)	Wave 2 (Age 13)
Reading	Reading books, comics, magazines	Reading for pleasure or interest
Housework	Household chores/ housework	Housework
Family	Visits to relative's house for purposes other than play	Spending time with family
	On a family outing	On an outing (to beach, mountains, shopping, theatre, match)
	On a shopping trip	Out shopping to buy things
Other	Religious activity	Other (religious activity, medical appointment, babysitting, GUI activity)
	Not sure/missing	Don't know/missing

Table 1 Categorisation of Activities for Waves 1 and 2

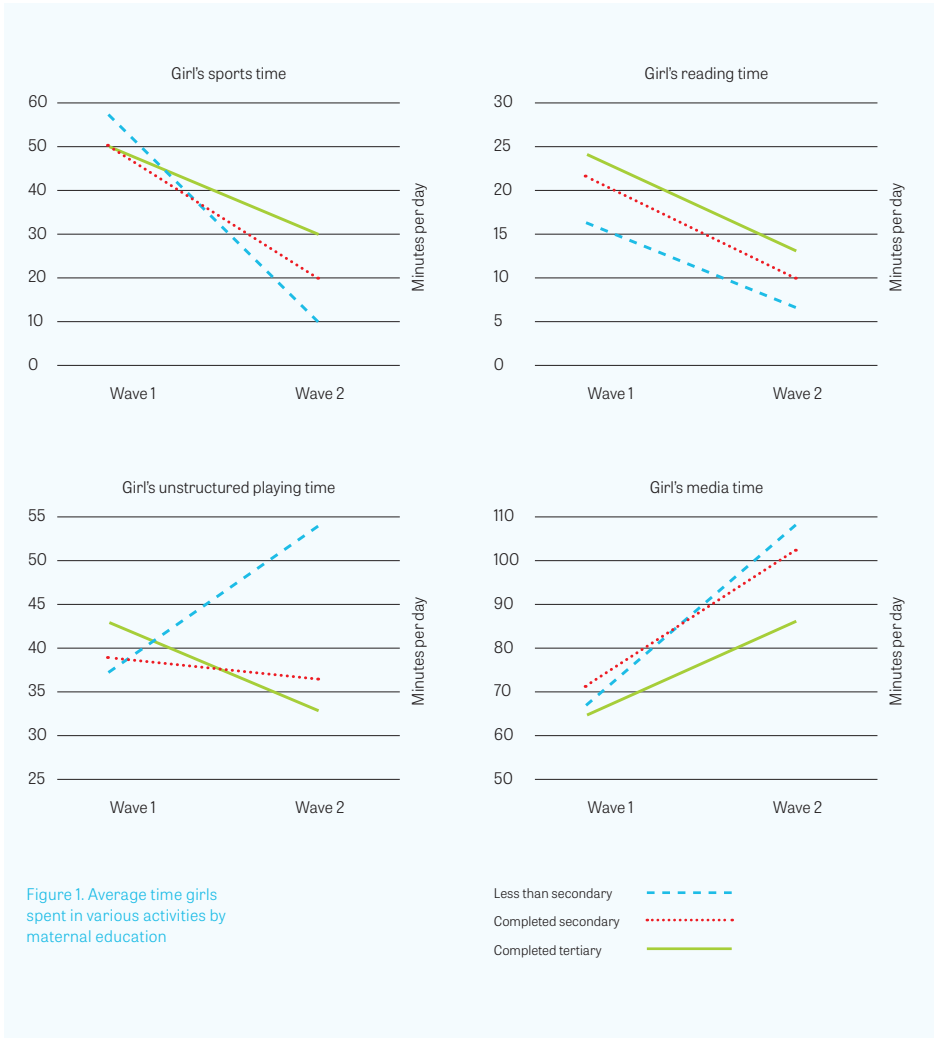


Figure 1: Average time girls spent in various activities by maternal education

Interestingly, the gaps in reading time are already evident for girls by age 9: girls from lower SES backgrounds spend about 7 minutes less in reading than their counterparts. This gap persists at age 13.

Finally, for unstructured playing time, the trends by SES diverge even more. While girls from low SES backgrounds increase their unstructured playing time from age 9 to age 13 by 15 minutes per day, girls from average and high SES backgrounds decrease their unstructured playing time by 2 and 10 minutes, respectively.

We find very similar results for boys across the four categories of activities.

Discussion

Although a large international literature has documented that the developmental opportunities are not equally available to all children, there has been relatively little quantitative evidence on how children in Ireland spend their time. Data from the GUI study shed light on disparities in the capacity to engage in different types of activities by family background. Given the potential impact of skills learned as part of time spent in skill-promoting activities on adult outcomes, this issue is particularly relevant for intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.

In this analysis, we find there are substantial differences in time spent in play activity by family background. This is especially the case by age 13, at which point gaps in reading, sports, media and unstructured play are all apparent. However, gaps in time spent reading are evident by age 9 for both girls and boys. Both girls and boys from disadvantaged backgrounds spend less time in sport activities and more time using media at age 13. For unstructured playing time, girls from high SES backgrounds reduce time spent in this category from age 9 to 13, while girls from low SES backgrounds substantially increase this time.

Spending less time in sports and reading are likely to be a disadvantage for the child's physical health and cognitive development, given that the literature has specifically linked these activities to future health and wellbeing. From this perspective, the systematic differences in time spent in these activities is concerning and supports the hypothesis that not all children are receiving an equal opportunity to engage in the types of play that would best support their development. Widening gaps as children age indicate increasing disparities. Some studies have suggested that increased media time is linked to worse outcomes, although further evidence is required.

Time spent in unstructured play may be helpful for promoting skills such as independence, resilience, and social competence (Coatsworth et al., 2005; Lang and Deitz, 1990; Malone, 2007). More evidence in the Irish context is needed, and future research would benefit from more consistent and precise definitions of what constitutes unstructured play. In the data, those from higher SES backgrounds have less opportunity to engage in this type of activity and therefore may be disadvantaged by missing out on the potential developmental benefits that it may provide. Likewise, those from lower SES backgrounds may be gaining most from this type of activity, which in turn could be helping to lessen gradients in other activities such as reading.

Our study has some limitations. In the time use survey, activity descriptions changed from wave 1 to wave 2, and therefore categories are not perfectly aligned. In addition, time use data were self-reported by caregivers and children and may suffer from inconsistencies and recall error.

Most of the literature we cite which relates childhood play and activities to later outcomes comes from international evidence. While further work is required to establish the causal pathways linking childhood time use to adult characteristics, even descriptive data on this subject are lacking for Ireland. Future research along these lines would help to establish the

extent to which different types of activities and play are beneficial for children during childhood across the life cycle. Such analyses may also form the basis of policy and/or interventions aimed at promoting skill development in early life in Ireland.

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Ameliorating free-flow play for young children through increased access to school play spaces indoors and out

**Reflections on an
Irish context**

Tríona Stokes

Introduction

The spaces which children access for play have long been considered in terms of the affordances they offer in both the natural and built environment (Gibson, 1977; Broadhead, 2004; Kernan, 2010). Indoor and outdoor spaces for play are considered in this article with reference to an Irish doctoral study which examined children's agency in school-based pretend play. Space, along with the further drama elements of time and presence served as a frame through which the perceived parameters surrounding free-flow play were investigated in the study. Free-flow play is characterised by its free and flexible nature, which facilitates children to respond to events or change the direction of play.

In this article, the policy context in relation to play and curriculum is briefly presented. The identified play form is then distinguished and play in schools is subsequently introduced. This segues into the analysis of the perceived parameters of school-based pretend play and the extension of such parameters, to outdoor spaces and their emergent narratives, in particular.

The Irish Curricular Policy Context

In Ireland, the National Early Years Strategy (2013) addresses policy issues affecting all educators working with children from 0-6 years, creating an overlap of responsibility between early education and childcare providers and primary schools in Ireland (French, 2012). The strategy specifically addresses the implementation of curriculum as part of policy issues affecting children from 0-6 years. Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006), and the early years' Aistear Curricular Framework (NCCA, 2009), referred to as Aistear, centralised the role of play.

The conception of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) has been informed by other early childhood curricula, particularly, the play-based Te Whariki (1996) of New Zealand. Te Whariki is interwoven as one unit, resisting potential unravelling into specific

aims, outcomes and objectives (Ministry of Education, NZ, 1996). Each strand of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) mirrors one of four of five interwoven strands of Te Whariki, namely, Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. In terms of pretend play specifically, Communicating develops children's access to multiple modes of expression, including role-play, for different purposes and uses. Exploring and Thinking involves children making sense of their world, including questioning and investigating through the formation, testing and refinement of ideas through play.

Characteristics of Play and Free-Flow Play

In accordance with Hutt's (1979) play typology ludic play behaviours include repetition, ingenuity, symbolic and innovative practices. Pretend play is located in the realm of ludic play as children use objects in both a functional and representational manner. Smilansky (1968) further distinguishes socio-dramatic play as grounded in the everyday social experience of children depicting familiar settings of home or crèche, and defines thematic-fantasy play, as a departure from these. Both socio-dramatic play and thematic-fantasy play are encompassed in Aistear's (NCCA, 2009) 'umbrella' term pretend play, and constitute the focus of this article.

The voluntary nature of play according to Aistear makes it spontaneous, with players 'shaping it as they go, changing the characters, events, objects and locations' (NCCA, 2009: 53). 'Free' play and 'structured' play have traditionally been distinguished by both resourcing and the presence or absence of expected outcomes (Moyles, 1989). Tovey (2013, p. 17) emphasizes the freedom necessary for play where children can 'choose, take control, explore, create, imagine and go beyond the here and now'. Thus, play is a process, as opposed to that which emphasizes skill acquisition or product, which would effectively negate its 'free' status (Bruce, 2001). While opportunity can and was created

for 'free' play in schools, the related study noted an emphasis of 'structured' play in how play was operationalised.

Play in School

As schools are, by their nature, rule-bound, institutionalised spaces, classrooms are socially, culturally and historically embedded within ideologies of pedagogy (Holt, 2004). Consequently, the practices of teaching and learning therein are mediated by the social and cultural identities of their participants and their interactions (Rogers, 2010). Further, Rogers and Evans (2008) note that play in school is shaped by the contextual features that surround it, including the limited nature of classroom environments and school timetables, and the resources made available for play. Thus, space to play, is treated as both a physical and metaphorical concept in a consideration of how it is shaped by classroom contexts.

Informed by the Theory of Affordances (Gibson, 1977), the built school environment can be analysed for its affordance of children's activities (Kernan, 2010). Active play, such as superhero play is facilitated by access to outdoor spaces (Broadhead, 2004). Therefore, outdoor school spaces may be more likely to be used in play, if there is easy or direct classroom access. Teacher challenges to outdoor play facilitation include weather, and health and safety reasons owing to child security and supervision requirements, and a potential lack of recognition of the importance of outdoor play spaces by other staff members (Stokes, 2016). Whilst practical considerations must be accounted for, Dixon and Day (2004) advocate that school staff capitalise on outdoor play possibilities. Opportunities for free-flow play and its amelioration are now discussed, with reference to a related Irish doctoral study (Stokes, 2016).

Extending the Parameters of Play

Across three Irish primary schools, the doctoral study referenced primarily sought

the perceptions relating to agency in school-based pretend play of 4–6-year-old children (n77). Secondly, it sought the reflections of supporting educators (n=7) on the perceptions communicated by children. Data were gathered mainly through observations of classroom play, and small-group semi-structured interviews. Children's analysis of outdoor play and extending play parameters through narrative are initially discussed, before teachers' reflections are presented under play facilitation.

With reference to an action-based storyline observed, a rationale for the preferred use of outdoor schoolyard space was offered by one child (Stokes, 2016: 75):

Because it's like a city – because Spiderman in New York and Batman could be in Goblin [sic] city.

Schoolyard access literally extended the parameters of play in this case as guards gave chase to robbers, identified by children at interview. The children in role as robbers were captured on the boiler house steps representing a jail. Handcuffs were reportedly used to catch robbers and to hold doors open. Thus, the children made use of the given features of an outdoor play landscape of the school, resonating with Affordance Theory (Gibson, 1977).

At interview children claimed that the outdoors was good because you could pretend 'the outdoors is anywhere' (Stokes, 2016:75). When this comment was relayed to other children, it was asserted that playing outdoors makes pretend play 'more real'. 'Real guards catch robbers outside', one child explained, and three others readily agreed (Stokes, 2016:75). Another child offered:

You can pretend you are an actual Garda and run after robbers.

Children's assertion that the police chase is more authentic outdoors points to the potential for the assessment of outdoor play spaces, and their ready access. Conversely, it holds implications for the impact on the quality of pretend play in the

absence of access to such school spaces, and potential play limitation through containment. James and Evans (2009) identify space, as well as organisational, physical and social factors as reasons for the containment of play.

Merging Narratives

Some narratives observed merged as the use of spaces, characters and objects overlapped in free-flow play across indoor and outdoor space access. A storyline about caring for puppies began when all three groups of players planned to go on holiday together as part of the emergent storyline. Approximately two thirds of the class, or twenty children 'boarded' the aeroplane, depicted by a play tent, bound for the agreed destination. Children in role as guards chasing robbers outdoors stated that they were also travelling to America by plane (Stokes, 2016: 76):

Researcher: *What are you playing here on the steps?*

Nevin: *We are guards and we're going to America.*

Researcher: *And where is the jail?*

Nevin: *Here, (indicating the yard). And they are handcuffed there (shows a schoolyard door where the handcuffs attach to the handle)*

Researcher: *And where is the plane?*

Natasha: *It's far, far away (indicating the indoor play tent depicting the plane).*

Researcher: *And why are you giving out magazines and papers? (depicted by a bundle of class copybooks labelled with children's names).*

Natasha: *They have to check 'cos everyone's name is on it.*

Researcher: *And are the papers for the plane?*

Natasha: *Yes, the papers are for the plane (mimes reading).*

This dialogue demonstrates children accessing multiple play spaces without boundaries, facilitating play development through intersecting narratives, highlighting its fluid, free-flow nature (Bruce, 2001). Pretend play moves location fictionally and physically, forging differing free-flow play aspects of experience for the child (Tovey, 2013). Overall, the play 'flows with quality' as the collaboration evidenced merges differing play narratives seamlessly (Bruce, 2001). The imaginative use of additional classroom objects is evidenced in this instance by copybooks representing in-flight magazines. Highly creative 'uber-narratives' can emerge, displaying a symbolic use of resources, featuring a wide range of characters and a complexity of plot (Stokes, 2017). This demands both higher-level negotiation skills and collaboration by players.

Facilitating Outdoor Play in Schools

In the related study, the desire to incorporate outdoor play spaces was identified by two senior staff members, demonstrating an awareness of the benefits outdoor spaces to children at play. Appreciation of the open-ended possibilities of outdoor play was conveyed by the corresponding classroom teacher:

I think what the actual term is, is an imaginative play zone? Basically where things are, if you don't have a slide, you'll have a hill, so the children will decide what that will be... rather than a playground, where it [slide] can only be used as one thing. So you're hoping to see a lot of pretend play related to that outside.

This constitutes a further example of teacher analysis of the play affordances of the built environment of the school. Auditing the built school environment for its affordance of children's activities is recommended by Kernan (2010). Further assessment of the unique built environment of any school could facilitate analysis of free-flow play in terms of creative outputs, reflective of abstract thinking and problem-solving opportunities for children at play.

Conclusion

This article identified examples of pretend play across outdoor and indoor school spaces, where an extension to play parameters served its development. It indicates resultant enhanced play quality, associated with free-flow play, as evidenced by the development of merging and emerging imaginative play narratives. This serves as one particular means for enrolling children as the shapers of play, serving to further embed and realise the aims and principles of the Aistear Curricular Framework (NCCA, 2009).

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The play and pastimes of sixth class children in urban DEIS Primary Schools

Lauren Kavanagh and Susan Weir

Introduction

The ways in which children spend their free time influence their development, learning, and well-being (Ginsberg, 2007). Playing sport, for example, has been shown to have benefits for children's physical, psychological and social well-being (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity and Payne, 2013), while frequent leisure reading is strongly associated with the academic achievement of children and adolescents (Kavanagh, Shiel and Gilleece, 2015; Perkins, Cosgrove, Moran and Shiel, 2012). Studies have consistently demonstrated associations between involvement in a range of structured out-of-school activities and student achievement (e.g. Cooper, Valentine, Nye and Lindsay, 1999; Eccles and Barber, 1999; McCoy, Quail and Smyth, 2012), and have indicated that such benefits may be particularly marked for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Marsh and Kleitman, 2002). Perkins (2017) found that involvement in certain leisure activities (e.g. sports, cultural activities and leisure reading) predicted academic resilience in a sample of children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in Ireland. In contrast, large amounts of television watching by children is associated with lower academic achievement and attainment (e.g. Hancox, Milne and Poulton, 2005), and television watching has been found to be negatively related to time spent interacting with family, doing homework, and engaging in creative play (Vandewater, Bickham and Lee, 2006).

Outdoor physical play is deemed important for children's development due to its role in promoting independence and self-regulation, its positive effects on health, and its social benefits, such as improved communication and cooperation (Brockman, Jago and Fox, 2011; Whitebread, Basilio, Kvalja and Verma, 2012). Research indicates that children and young people value time to play and interact with one another in ways that are not directed or supervised by adults (Armitage, 2004; Brockman et al., 2011), although unsupervised time with peers has been shown in some studies

to be predictive of problem behaviours in late childhood and adolescence (Pettit, Bates, Dodge and Meece, 1999; Lam, McHale and Crouter, 201).

There are indications that the ways that young people in developed countries use their free time are changing, with less engagement in unsupervised play, outdoor play, and 'free' play (Gray, 2011) and greater time spent on structured activities, television watching, and the playing of computer games (Clements, 2004; Hofferth and Sandberg, 2001). Among the explanations posited for this shift are: growing urbanisation (Whitebread et al., 2012), an increasingly risk-averse society (Clements, 2004; Gill, 2008), and what Mayall (2000) terms the 'scholarisation of childhood', whereby activities thought to boost academic achievement are prioritised (by adults) over other ways in which children can spend free time. Proponents of the 'overscheduling hypothesis' express concern that children are now involved in too many organised activities at the behest of their parents and argue that this is linked with poorer developmental and educational outcomes. Several studies, however, have failed to find support for this hypothesis (Mahoney and Vest, 2012), finding instead that greater participation in organised activities is associated with better outcomes. Some studies in the area have found evidence of a threshold effect, whereby after a certain level of involvement, the positive effects of extracurricular activity level off or decline slightly (Fredricks and Eccles, 2010).

Cultural attitudes transmitted to children, mainly through parental behaviour, influence the nature and extent of children's play and leisure time activities, meaning that variation in free time use has been found along socioeconomic and gender lines (Whitebread et al., 2012). Research suggests that children of lower socioeconomic status, for example, engage in more unstructured activities, outdoor play, and television watching than their more advantaged counterparts, and engage less frequently in sports activities, indoor play and leisure reading (McHale et al., 2001). Studies conducted in the United States have indicated that boys play more sport and spend more time

watching television than girls, who spend more times on hobbies, particularly those involving arts activities (e.g. McHale et al., 2001).

In this paper, data collected as part of the evaluation of the School Support Programme (SSP) under DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) are used to explore whether patterns and trends in play and pastimes demonstrated in other contexts are also observable among children in Ireland attending urban primary schools serving large concentrations of pupils from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

DEIS and its Evaluation

DEIS was introduced in 2007 and is the current initiative of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) aimed at addressing educational disadvantage in Ireland. In 2005, the schools with the highest concentrations of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were identified for inclusion in the School Support Programme (SSP) under DEIS, which aims to bring together and build upon previous schemes aimed at addressing educational disadvantage. Since 2007, the Educational Research Centre has been conducting an independent evaluation of the SSP on behalf of the DES. The programme is multifaceted and its evaluation involves an array of activities in post-primary schools and in urban and rural primary schools.

The focus of the present article is on urban primary schools.¹ Urban SSP primary schools are classified as belonging to one of two bands, Band 1 or Band 2, with Band 1 schools having the greatest assessed levels of disadvantage and consequently receiving more resources.

In 2007, and every three years since, large-scale data collection has been undertaken in a representative sample of urban DEIS primary schools² (originally 120 schools, now 118).

³Tests of reading and mathematics achievement have been administered to pupils in target grades (Second, Third, Fifth [since 2010] and Sixth class) in order to monitor changes in

achievement over time.⁴

Contextual information has been collected via questionnaires administered to pupils, parents and principals in conjunction with the achievement tests. The data presented below are derived from the pupil questionnaire, which, in addition to eliciting information on children's attitudes towards school and learning, and their homework activities, seeks information about their use of free time.

Method

Participants

Although questionnaires have been administered at four grade levels, just one, Sixth class, has been selected as the focus here. Approximately 4,000 Sixth class pupils completed the questionnaire on each of four occasions, and the samples were evenly balanced with respect to gender (Table 1). Pupils are drawn from seventy Band 1 and forty-eight Band 2 schools.

Procedure

Data were collected in May of 2007 2010, 2013 and 2016. Questionnaires were completed by pupils during class time and questionnaire items were read aloud to the class groups by their class teachers.

¹Interested readers are pointed to reports on evaluation activities in rural primary schools (Weir, Archer and Millar, 2009; Weir and McAvinue, 2013) and post-primary schools (McAvinue and Weir, 2015; Weir, McAvinue, Moran and O'Flaherty, 2014).

²For more information on the sampling procedure, see Weir and Archer (2011).

³Attrition in the sample of schools is attributable to school amalgamations.

⁴See Kavanagh, Weir and Moran (2017) for a summary of trends in achievement in urban DEIS primary schools from 2007 to 2016.

Analysis

The play and leisure time activities of Sixth class pupils in 2016 are described in the following section and are considered by gender. Trends since 2007 are also explored. All reported percentages are unweighted. Pearson chi square tests were used to determine whether there were significant associations between children's engagement in various activities and a) year (looking only at 2007 and 2016) and b) gender. Effect sizes (Φ and Cramer's V) are also reported.⁵

Findings

Children were asked to indicate the frequency with which they played sport outside of school. In 2007, sixty percent of Sixth class pupils indicated that they played sport every day or almost every day. This percentage decreased at each subsequent round of data collection. In 2016, forty-eight percent of Sixth class pupils indicated that they played sport outside of school every day or almost every day (Table 2). The association between year (2007, 2016) and frequency of playing sport was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3) = 117.18$, $p < .001$, $V = 0.12$, and the effect size can be interpreted as small to medium (Cohen, 1988).

Gender differences in sport engagement were significant. In 2016, sixty-one percent of boys indicated that they played sport every day or almost every day, compared to twenty-five percent of girls. Girls were also twice as likely to indicate that they hardly ever or never played sport outside of school (fourteen and seven percent, respectively; Table 3). The association between gender and frequency of playing sport was statistically significant, and the effect can be described as medium $\chi^2(3) = 284.91$, $p < .001$, $V = 0.20$.

⁵ Phi (Φ) coefficients are reported where both variables in the analysis are dichotomous, and Cramer's V is reported where at least one variable has more than two levels. Using Cohen's (1988) guidelines, a Φ value of 0.1 is interpreted as a small effect, 0.3 as medium, and 0.5 as large. For all Cramer's V values reported here, .06 is interpreted as a small effect, .17 as medium and .29 as large (Cohen, 1988).

Children were asked to indicate how often they spent time 'hanging out' with friends outside of school. In 2007, seventy-six percent of pupils indicated that they 'hung out' with friends every day or almost every day after school. This percentage decreased at each subsequent round of data collection; in 2016, fifty-nine percent of Sixth class pupils indicated they hung out with friends this frequently (Table 4). The association between year of testing and frequency of hanging out with friends was statistically significant and the effect size indicates a medium effect, $\chi^2(3) = 260.10$, $p < .001$, $V = .18$. There was no significant association between gender and frequency of hanging out with friends in 2016, $\chi^2(3) = 7.67$, $p = .053$.

Children were asked whether they were involved in each of a number of structured out-of-school activities. The most common type of involvement was with sports clubs, with over half of pupils indicating that they belonged to such a club on each occasion of data collection (Table 6). One in five Sixth class pupils participated in none of the listed activities.

Although there were statistically significant associations between year and rates of membership of all clubs other than youth clubs, effect sizes were negligible to small (Phi coefficients ranging from .02 to .16), indicating that there has not been much change in participation rates over time.

The proportion of pupils not engaged in any activity increased from seventeen percent in 2007 to twenty percent in 2016, with a similar decrease in the proportion engaged in four or more of the activities (from seven percent in 2007 to three percent in 2016). The association between number of activities engaged in and year was statistically significant, but the effect was small, $\chi^2(4) = 36.33$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = .07$.

For some of the activities (scouts/guides, homework club, youth club), gender differences in participation were not statistically significant ($p = .17$, .17, and .65, respectively). However, there was a significant association between gender

Year	N	Mean age	% Girls	% Band 1
2007	2007	2007	48.5	53.2
2010	2010	2010	49.8	53.5
2013	2013	2013	48.9	52.4
2016	4156	12.4	49.4	54.6

Table 1 Information on samples of Sixth class pupils who completed questionnaires as part as the SSP evaluation, by year

	2007	2010	2013	2016
Every day or almost every day	59.8	56.4	50.2	48.3
Once or twice a week	27.2	30.0	32.5	32.2
Once or twice a month	6.2	6.8	7.9	9.0
Hardly ever or never	6.8	6.8	9.3	10.4

Table 2 Percentages of Sixth class pupils playing sport outside of school with varying degrees of frequency, by year.

	Girls	Boys
Every day or almost every day	35.1	61.2
Once or twice a week	39.8	25.0
Once or twice a month	11.3	6.6
Hardly ever or never	13.7	7.2

Table 3 Percentages of Sixth class pupils playing sport outside of school with varying degrees of frequency, by gender, 2016

Sixth Class

	2007	2010	2013	2016
Every day or almost every day	75.8	72.1	62.4	59.1
Once or twice a week	15.4	17.9	23.4	23.9
Once or twice a month	4.9	5.8	7.9	10.1
Hardly ever or never	3.8	4.2	6.3	6.9

Table 4 Percentages of pupils 'hanging out' with friends outside of school with varying degrees of frequency, by year

	Girls	Boys
Every day or almost every day	57.7	60.6
Once or twice a week	24.9	23.0
Once or twice a month	11.0	9.2
Hardly ever or never	6.4	7.2

Table 5 Percentages of pupils 'hanging out' with friends outside of school with varying degrees of frequency, by gender, 2016

	2007	2010	2013	2016
Dance/drama group	26.4	23.9	21.0	16.7
Band/choir/orchestra	21.1	24.0	24.3	18.8
Sports club	57.3	58.0	56.6	54.1
Scouts or guides	7.1	7.1	6.2	5.5
Youth club	28.2	31.2	33.1	27.7
Homework club	15.3	17.3	18.6	17.1
No activity	17.0	16.5	16.9	20.1
One activity	36.1	34.5	35.8	39.3
Two activities	26.2	27.6	28.9	27.0
Three activities	13.5	14.6	13.8	10.2
Four or more	7.1	6.9	4.7	3.4

Table 6 Percentages of pupils who are members of various clubs or groups, by year

	Girls	Boys
Dance/drama group	29.9	3.9
Band/choir/orchestra	25.6	12.1
Sports club	46.7	62.7
Scouts or guides	6.0	5.0
Youth club	28.1	27.4
Homework club	16.3	18.0
None	19.6	20.5
One activity	34.9	43.6
Two activities	28.3	25.8
Three activities	12.2	8.3
Four or more activities	5.1	1.7

Table 7 Percentages of pupils who are members of various clubs or groups, by gender, 2016

	2007	2010	2013	2016
More than 4 hrs	18.0	15.7	16.3	13.7
2–4 hours	28.9	26.3	27.6	24.8
1–2 hours	35.0	38.3	35.9	35.9
Up to an hour	18.1	19.7	20.2	25.6

Table 8 Percentages of pupils spending different amounts of time watching television on school days, by year

	Girls	Boys
More than 4 hrs	11.9	15.5
2–4 hours	27.0	22.8
1–2 hours	36.9	36.9
Up to an hour	24.8	24.8

Table 9 Percentages of pupils spending different amounts of time watching television on school days, by gender, 2016

	2007	2010	2013	2016
More than 4 hrs	9.5	11.3	13.9	12.6
2-4 hours	14.4	16.4	17.8	13.4
1-2 hours	26.3	26.7	24.9	14.4
Up to 1 hour	49.8	45.6	43.4	59.5

Table 10 Percentages of pupils spending different amounts of time playing computer games on school days, by year

	Girls	Boys
More than 4 hrs	4.1	20.8
2-4 hours	5.1	21.5
1-2 hours	8.1	20.7
Up to 1 hour	18.3	18.8
No time	64.4	18.3

Table 11 Percentages of pupils spending different amounts of time playing computer games on school days, by gender, 2016

and membership of a music group (band/choir or orchestra), $\chi^2(1) = 121.93$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = .17$, with girls in the sample more likely to be involved in such a group (twenty-six percent of girls compared to twelve percent of boys; Table 7). Girls were also significantly more likely to be involved in a dance or drama group (thirty percent of girls, four percent of boys; $\chi^2(1) = 491.68$, $p < .001$), and the effect can be interpreted as medium in magnitude ($\Phi = .37$). Girls were significantly less likely to be part of a sports club (forty-seven percent) than boys (sixty-seven percent), $\chi^2(1) = 118.60$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = .17$.

There has been little change in the time spent watching television on school days since 2007. Each year, the most common response was that pupils spent 1-2 hours watching television on school days (35 to 38 percent; Table 8). Although the association between year and time spent watching television was statistically significant

$\chi^2(3) = 87.50$, $p < .001$, the effect was small ($V = .10$). In 2016, 14 percent of pupils indicated that they spent more than four hours each day watching television. Boys were slightly more likely than girls to spend this much time watching television (16 percent and twelve percent, respectively; Table 9); the association between gender and time spent watching television was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3) = 18.75$, $p < .001$, but the effect was negligible ($V = .04$).

Finally, pupils were asked to indicate the amount of time they spent playing computer games (Table 10). There was a significant association between year and time spent playing computer games $\chi^2(3) = 194.51$, $p < .001$, $V = .16$. A slightly higher proportion of pupils in 2016 spent more than four hours per day playing computer games (13%) than did so in 2007 (10%).

Gender differences in computer game engagement were evident in 2016. Just over one

fifth of Sixth class boys indicated that they spent more than four hours each school day playing computer games, compared to four percent of girls. Sixty-four percent of girls indicated that they spent no time playing computer games, compared to eighteen percent of boys (Table 11). The association between gender and time spent playing computer games was statistically significant, $\chi^2(3) = 910.48$, $p < .001$ and the effect size can be interpreted as large ($V = .42$).

Conclusion

The present study offers evidence that engagement in some unstructured activity (hanging out with friends) and physical activity (playing sport) has declined among Sixth class pupils in urban DEIS primary schools since 2007. However, it does not appear that this has occurred due to equivalent increases in time spent watching television or increased involvement in structured out-of-school activities. There has been a small increase in the proportion of pupils playing computer games for long periods of time and it is possible that there has been an increase in other forms of screen time; this will be considered in a further evaluation report (Kavanagh and Weir, forthcoming). The forthcoming report will also explore associations between leisure activities and achievement in reading and mathematics and will allow comparison of free time use across different grade levels.

Gender differences found in the present study are generally in line with those observed in other contexts (e.g. McHale, 2001), with girls reporting higher participation in arts activities and boys participating more in sports. Given the documented benefits of each, encouraging increased participation of girls in sport and of boys in arts activities seems warranted. It does not appear from the present findings that Sixth class pupils in urban DEIS schools are overscheduled. Rather, one in five children is involved in no organised out-of-school activity. The students in the sample are drawn from schools serving concentrations of disadvantaged

families. Data from periodic national assessments of achievement could be used to explore whether similar patterns of free-time use are observed in a nationally representative sample.

Promoting involvement in structured out-of-school activities may serve to support children's learning (Cooper et al., 1999; Kavanagh and Weir, forthcoming; McCoy et al., 2012). However, it seems clear from the literature that balance is important, and that children's leisure time should not be organised solely based on adult priorities (Ginsberg, 2007). To this end, further research into which free time and play activities are most enjoyed and valued by children in Ireland would be of merit.

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From desire to design: Engaging children in designing for play in an Irish School setting

Eimear Cagney, Chloe Carroll and Helen Lynch

Background

This study was part of a community engagement project between the Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy Department at University College Cork (UCC) and a local primary school, who wished to build an outdoor playspace on their school grounds. The aim of the project was to engage the school pupils in action research: to explore what the pupils of the school valued in outdoor play which in turn, would inform the content and design of the play space. The study began in 2015 and concluded in 2016 when the school completed the building project and the playspace was officially launched: <http://www.gaelcoiluiriaada.ie/nuachtnews/cul-anti-oscailt-oifigiuil/?lang=en>.

Introduction

Evidence is emerging in many countries that children experience fewer opportunities for outdoor free play both at home and at school than in previous generations (Fanning, 2011; Kilkelly, Lynch, Moore, O'Connell and Field, 2016). This is thought to be a contributor to increased mental health difficulties and obesity in children. Consequently, research has begun to study play in relation to health and wellbeing (Ginsburg, 2007), and specifically, outdoor play (e.g. Barron, 2013; Cole-Hamilton and Gleave, 2011; Kernan and Devine, 2010). School grounds have become a central part of this newly developing area of research. For example, in Australian schools, researchers found that when loose parts are introduced at break-time, levels of teamwork, constructive and creative play increased (Bundy et al., 2009; Bundy et al., 2011). In other studies, play diversity and activity increased by incorporating natural elements (Dyment and Bell, 2008; Fjortoft, 2001). Such work has led to a new interest in designing outdoor playspaces with high play-value. However, children have been typically excluded from having a say in designing their play environments, despite this being identified as important from a child's-rights approach (National Children's Office [NCO], 2004). This study aimed to research outdoor play

space design from a child-centred approach: to explore the perspectives of children from one primary school in Ireland on their ideal play space. Ethical approval was granted by the Cork Research Ethics Committee, UCC, Ireland, 2015.

Methodology

A qualitative ethnographic study was conducted to explore children's ideas about their play spaces and outdoor play preferences (Holmes, 2005). A mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2008) was used to generate data in one city school, of mixed gender children aged from four to 12 years.

Recruitment

This project was a partnership project with a local school, therefore the recruitment site was established at the outset. All pupils of the school were invited to take part, and consent and assent sought from parents and children who attended the school. An information session was held in the school to explain the study, and letters sent out to the families to invite them to take part. Further information was shared with staff, parents, and children to ensure informed consent could be achieved, resulting in a final number of 269 participants for the project.

Data Generation

All children who consented to take part, engaged in a combination of visual, language and spatial methods during data generation over four months. This included a) drawings from each of the 269 pupils b) observation of play during yard time c) focus groups of 18 children representing the range of ages among the children (4-6 years, 7-9 years and 10-12 years d) activities, including crafts and games e) meetings with the 14 teachers. The use of mapping or photography was not possible as the school did not yet have the playspace developed- the combination of methods chosen was to elicit the children's ideas of their ideal play experiences by using visual drawings, and photographs of outdoor play gathered from online and printed sources.

Depth and breadth of data was sought through exploring play affordances in the drawings and focus group discussions- e.g. children were asked about their feelings and emotions and mapped out what kinds of play experiences were most fun. This helped the children to move beyond simply listing swings or zip-lines, in the initial focus group work.

Data Analysis

Data from the initial focus groups were transcribed to text, and initial codes identified for discussion in the second focus group. Using charting methods, with words on cards, and pictures of playground equipment, the children engaged in an initial analysis and categorisation of ideas elicited from discussing the visual materials. Following this process, data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data were coded manually in phases of coding and categorisation, guided by the research question. Core themes were identified that led to the development of three key findings supported by sub themes of what the children found to be the most important elements to their school play space.

Key Findings

Themes	1) Ideas about Context	2) Ideas about Doing	3) Ideas about Meaning
Subthemes	Named Equipment	Affordances	Ownership
	Layout	Risky play and challenge	Expectation
	Nature	Safety Awareness	Input

Table 1 Percentages of pupils spending different amounts of time playing computer games on school days, by year.

Ideas about Context

Children identified three contextual aspects, relating to play space equipment, layout and nature. A consistent theme was the identification of equipment, important design features and what play they afford. Initially, children referred to familiar equipment from local playgrounds: Declan: "I'd like a basket swing, monkey bars and a zip wire". However, as discussion progressed, children were encouraged to expand their ideas more about the play value of their play space. For example, the majority of the children preferred the 'twisty' slide in comparison to the 'straight' slide: Niall: "You never know where you are going to end up". This demonstrates what kinds of play experiences the children preferred.

For the older children, the layout of play opportunities was important: Charlie: "So like it could start here and... then you could have the mushrooms (toadstools to jump on) and then go like through the pipeand then you could climb over this and that could be the end of the obstacle course." Furthermore, a separate area to sit and socialise was important for these children: Ciara: "I wanted the bench because it's fun and also you can talk to your friends and just relax some days instead of just going playing".

Children were of mixed opinions on whether nature should be integrated into the play space or allocated a specific area. Some children liked the idea of nature surrounding their playspace while others thought it was impractical: Aoife: "We could have a few flower gardens or something?", Orla: "But that might attract the bees!".

Ideas about Doing

A prominent theme that emerged was the need for a range of affordances that provides opportunities for different types of play. For example, when discussing why they liked spinning they responded: "I feel dizzy and I feel happy", "I like it...because you can see everything very fast". The younger children spoke of incorporating pretend play more than the older children when talking about play: e.g. on the basket swing: Sam:

"you go really fast...I jump off and destroy the ground"; Lucy: "I pretend I'm an air pilot", while the older groups would use it more to compete and challenge themselves: Declan: "well like you could make challenges and see who could go the highest and fastest". Findings highlighted how all children sought challenge, which was linked to a sense of achievement, and included risky play: John "...going the fastest you feel kind of nervous because you are just going so fast and you're not really being careful so like you don't really know what you are doing".

The concept of the 'just-right challenge' was prominent in discussions (Lynch and Hayes, 2015) when they explained their desired play space features that matched their ability: Caoimhe: "Not too easy and not too hard". Aoife: "We could have a down low house because some people are afraid of heights". This balance of risk versus safety was evident among all groups. One child expressed the desire to have a 'shaky bridge' over the prospective pond, however other children were concerned that they might fall in and get wet. They proposed a fence to prevent that from happening: Orla: "I was thinking of a pond but with fencing around it, so nobody could fall in".

Ideas about Meaning

It became apparent during the process that the children were developing a sense of ownership over their play space. This was due to the inclusive approach adopted and the centrality of the children in the design of their outdoor play space: Mark, "I just have one more idea!" Orla, "I just have one more idea too", as well as participants representing their class' ideas in the focus groups: Jane "my friend drew a tree house", Susan, "Some people in my class were saying like if you got a square trampoline and built it into the floor or something and you could like bounce off it".

However, the process was also one of managing expectations. Some children found it difficult to gauge what was achievable for a play space, while others focused on more realistic ideas: Niall: "Maybe a petting zoo?", Luke responds:

"That would be very expensive". This supports the finding that children clearly took ownership of the planning and design of their play space when given the opportunity: Charlie: "I like Niamh's idea with the pond, and maybe there could be like some fish?" Peter: "Yeah but who would feed the fish?"

Overall, findings highlight that the children were able to inform us of design features and affordances that matter to them, and valued having their voices heard.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to use an inclusive approach to offer insights into what children perceived to be important constituents of a successful school playspace. From findings, these included: fun, nature, risk, challenging design features, spaces for social play and safety. This was in some cases, at odds with what the adults considered as important: physical activity and time to run around. Overall, data informed the school to incorporate these varied needs in the design, and maximise the play value of the school yard. This is a significant issue as school playgrounds have become the primary outdoor play space for children in many westernised countries (Fanning, 2010).

The necessity of incorporating challenge and opportunities for risky play in the play space was an outcome of this study. This data is congruent with other studies where children's natural propensity towards risky play was identified (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike and Sleet., 2012). Risky play is intrinsically motivating for children and can promote feelings of self-efficacy through overcoming a physical challenge (Bundy et al., 2011). Research evidence highlights that children lacking in opportunities to engage in risky and challenging play results in children looking elsewhere for challenge and misusing equipment which could be even more dangerous (Bundy et al., 2009).

This project explored one way to engage children in research over time guided by the Australian Heart Foundation project (2013). In this Australian project, researchers found that consulting with local children on the design of a community play space resulted in the children feeling responsible for the area, which in turn contributed to its upkeep and decrease in vandalism. This sense of responsibility was evident in the Irish study, through the children's concern about maintaining the space. The participatory methods adopted appeared to foster a sense of ownership among the children, which was an unexpected outcome. Although children's voice in play provision is identified as important (NCO, 2004), there are no Irish guidelines to date, on how to enable children's participation in designing for play. Guidelines for participation in designing for play are needed to ensure children are supported to engage in their cultural and community lives and needs to be a priority for us in the play sector.

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Eimear Cagney and Chloe Carroll are Occupational Therapists, who conducted their final year research project under the direction of Dr. Helen Lynch: to explore children's participation in designing for play. This project forms part of the Playspaces Project work that is an ongoing area of study in the department, from a Rights-Based Occupational Science perspective. Chloe and Eimear have gone on to work as Occupational Therapy practitioners in the UK and Australia, while Dr Lynch continues to progress play research locally and internationally through the European COST Project on Play for Children with Disabilities: Ludi: <http://ludi-network.eu/>



The centrality of play in children's ideal after-school environments

Jacqui O'Riordan, Deirdre Horgan, Shirley Marin and Jane O'Sullivan

Introduction

This article presents an overview of children's views and preferences regarding how they spend their time after school. It draws on Department of Children and Youth Affairs' (DCYA) consultations, held in May and June 2016, with children on their views of after-school care. In the first instance we offer a brief overview of the consultations. Thereafter, we detail the importance children placed on play during these consultations and the types of play the children identified and valued. Finally, we consider how these views can inform and interact with the development of play policy in Ireland.

Overview of the consultations

During the consultations children were invited to express their preferences on what they like to do after-school, where they like to spend their time, who they like to spend it with, and their preferences on after-school care in general. Consultations were held with 177 primary school children, eighty-one of whom were aged between five and seven while ninety-six were aged between eight and twelve. They took place in co-operation with primary schools in Dublin, Dundalk, Limerick, Meath, Monaghan, Waterford, Wexford and Wicklow. The methods employed resembled those that are now commonly used in consultations conducted with children by the DCYA, encompassing a variety of child-centred group and activities that children are thought to generally enjoy (Barker and Weller, 2003; Fraser, S. Lewis, V.V. Ding, S. Kellett, M. and Robinson, C., 2007) Methods used with the younger children involved ice-breaker games, placemats, timelines, voting and an evaluation. In addition to these methods the consultations with the older children included a post-it activity and more sophisticated placemats and timelines. Members of our team observed these consultations and, thereafter, analysed the research materials in developing a report on children's perspectives on after-school care (DYCA, 2017).

Consultation Timeline findings on play and after-school care

For both cohorts of children involved in the consultations, the issue of play arose as being of paramount importance. It was identified as a category in and of itself and was incorporated into other activities the children prioritised such as being with friends, going on outings, relaxing, being in their own, friend's or relatives' houses. It emerged in some form or other for 43% of the after-school activities recorded for the younger children and 37% of recorded activities for the older children. Furthermore, when asked to design their ideal or imagined afterschool care, play was by far the most frequently mentioned category of activity. Their identification of the types of play they enjoy and wish to participate in is important in considering how it can be incorporated into play opportunities for children, which can be mapped onto the structure of their lives. This will ensure that the spaces they inhabit are conducive to the play opportunities they value. While children discussed all types of play during the consultation, including dramatic, creative, object-oriented, physical and static play (King and Howard, 2014), we focus here on three key areas of play identified through analysis of the consultations. These incorporate aspects of King and Howard's categories and capture the emphasis that arose through these consultations: outdoor play, technological play and relational/peer play .

Outdoor play and activities

The younger children, aged between five and seven years, placed an emphasis on outdoor play. This could include going on outings and participating in structured and unstructured outdoor activities. This could be explicit, as portrayed in the following: 'Playing outside in the sun' (Girl, 6) and implicit: 'Playing hurling off the wall' (Boy, 6). References to outside play were associated with active play: football, riding bikes or flickers, and bouncing on trampolines. They were also often open and relational, such



Figure 1



Figure 2

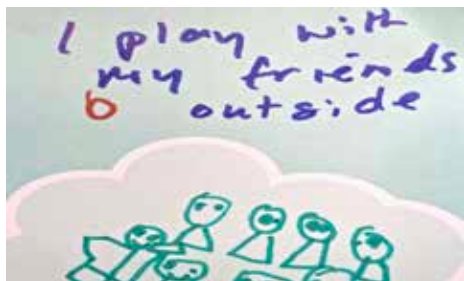


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

as 'I play with my friends outside' (Girl, 5) and included activities that we might not consider as play, per se such as 'gardening' (Girl, 6), 'Picking flowers' (Girl, 6) and 'Splashing in the puddles' (Girl, 5). Furthermore, most of the references to unstructured play were in relation to being outside 'Wing (game in the garden using our imagination)' (Boy, 7) and, in general, children simply identified outside as a place to go to play 'Go outside to play' (Boy, 7).

Going on outings and engaging in activities were also prominent in these children's responses, when asked what they do/would like to do after school. The activities they mentioned were swimming, gymnastics, football as well as outings to the cinema, going to the park, feeding the ducks, going to the farm and the beach. They also included more ambitious wishes, for instance, in wanting to 'Go to the moon'.

In the older children's (age eight to twelve) responses a significant number of the total references to play also referred to play outside. Usually children mentioned or depicted outside active play such as jumping on a trampoline, playing football, riding bicycles, scooting and rollerblading. In some cases, a child's pet was mentioned, such as 'Play with Bella, my dog' (Girl, 9) and interaction with pets seems to offer additional outdoor play affordances, such as playing outdoor with dogs or going horse-riding.

Outdoor play also offered some children opportunities for less adult supervised play opportunities, for example one child mentioned playing in her 'secret play house'. Organised outdoor activities were also frequently mentioned such as playing hurling and football. Others referred to going to the skate park, 'Go to the skate-park on my scooter' (Girl, 8). Others also mentioned they liked to go shopping and eating: 'Go shopping (Girl, 11), 'Go to McDonalds (Girl, 11).

Technological play

Young children mentioned some forms of tech play in their responses, although it was more

frequently mentioned by boys rather than girls. This gender difference might alert us to the intersections of play for young children with orientations towards embedded and embedding power structures in society. Playing with play stations, on their iPad, watching YouTube and Minecraft all arose as interests of theirs, indicating the importance of technology to them as a play component in their lives. Older children (eight to twelve year olds) also frequently mentioned tech play and this included playing on an Xbox, playing on a phone or tablet. For example, they wrote:

I play my Playstation3 (Boy, 10),

I play Clash of the clans. Clash Royale and Minecraft with my friends (Boy, 11)

Watch a movie – in between play on iPad and other things (Girl, 10), '

Play on my iPad for three straight hours (Girl, 8)

Relational and Peer Play

Children in both groups discussed the importance of playing with others, especially family and friends. Examples of this type of relational play included; 'Playing with friends, having fun' (Boy, 5); 'Play football or tennis with my Dad or sometimes my brother' (Girl, 7); 'Play princess game with Dad' (Girl, 7); and 'Play a board game with my family' (Girl, 11). Both groups mentioned peer play but the older children were more likely to discuss the centrality of friends to their play experiences. Specific examples of peer play children mentioned included; 'Bring my dog for a walk with my friend' (Girl, 12), 'Draw with friends' (Girl, 10), as well as doing organised activities with friends 'Go to my riding centre and ride my favourite horse 'Ellie' with my friend' (Girl, 12). The older children emphasised the importance of opportunities to socialise with their friends and identified spending time in their houses or friends' houses as an important part of this peer interaction. Examples include: 'Play with friends at their house or mine' (Girl, 11). Finally,

the children indicated they just liked spending time with friends. They mentioned calling to and hanging out with friends: 'Call for my friends' (Girl, 9), 'Hang with my friends' (Boy, 10).

Discussion and lessons for policy

The children, and especially the younger children, expressed interest in playing outdoors. The older children placed an emphasis on relational play, playing in general, playing indoors and outdoors. They continually expressed preferences for being with their friends, something that did not emerge as significantly for younger children. For the older age cohort, having opportunities where they could have privacy to be with their friends was important, as was having choice.

An earlier DYCA consultation (2015), with adult stakeholders, also highlighted the need to develop best practice in after-school provision drawing on international developments in the area. They identified greater accessibility of outdoor environments for children and the importance of children spending regular time outdoors in environments that meet their interests. Drawing on the views of the children in these consultations, the development of accessible outdoor environments that incorporate a range of activities, recognise children's interest in choice, and include spaces for some privacy would be advisable. While research highlights the importance of choice within play in children's lives (Henshall and Lacey, 2007; Kapasi and Gleave, 2009) it is also important to note that levels of choice intersect with the environments in which children are cared for, the original purposes of these environments as well as the adults present in those contexts who are caring for them (Strandell, 2013; Howard and King, 2014;). These factors need to be taken into account in assessing the potential and limitations of the contexts and spaces in which children are being cared for and in which they are learning and playing.

The children wanted opportunities to socialise with their friends whether they were at home, in a relative's or childminder's house or at a formal after-school setting. The importance of being with friends is also supported by research indicating the importance afforded by children to peer relations, friendships and play (Kernan, 2010). Another consideration that children identified, and were critical of, was being in settings that they felt they had outgrown and the, sometimes, limited range of activities and equipment available to them in some after-school settings. Examples they gave included seats that were too small for them, inappropriate and broken toys and equipment, being with children who were younger than them and being unable to play with them and having to follow similar and very predictable patterns of activities.

Furthermore, incorporating technological usage with play opportunities is important in the current societal context. Children experiences and interaction with technology make them 'digital natives'. We know that interaction with technology intersects with patterns of inclusion and exclusion in society (Warschaur, 2004). The children in this consultation mentioned playing with tablets, iPads, games like Minecraft and so on. They referred to relational and solitary play involving technology and gender differences can be identified in their interactions. Through a thoughtful and creative examination of their preferences and how they might interact with technological developments, play has the potential to support work towards making technology 'girl friendly' and relational, should the environments in which they play and opportunities presented be attractive to them.

More generally, in considering play in the lives of children and young people, the preferences they have expressed in where, when and how they like to spend this free time has important implications for the formation of policy and incorporation of opportunities for play that reflect and respond to their views.

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The Educator's Role in Supporting Non- Gendered Play in Early Childhood Education Settings

Vasilena Vasileva

Introduction

This article outlines educator's role in supporting children's play when they want or need to cross gender boundaries in early childhood settings catering for children between 0- and 5- years old. The current policy concerning gender and regulating educators' work in Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings is discussed, as well as some of the challenges educators face when translating policy into practice.

Gender in Early Childhood

The foundation of the female-male polarity is set early in childhood, as the child's own understanding of being a boy or a girl develops and the child begins associating different behavioural expectations with each gender. This process can start forming from birth as children learn stereotypes from their environment and the ways they are socialised by parents, carers, and peers (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000). The majority of children use the gender labels girl or boy before they are two years old (Zosuls, Ruble, Tamis-Lemonda, and Martin, 2013). Once the child makes that classification, s/he enters a binary pattern of meaning-making, which can be highly problematic (Yelland, 1998). Bias and stereotypes that put children in the societal binary of female or masculine can be very limiting and the adults working with young children need to recognise the impact such stereotypes can have on children's lives (Chapman, 2016) and help them extend their gender discourses and develop understanding of gender that transgresses the stereotypical binary.

Play offers children a context to engage in social learning; in play, children can practice new skills and understandings before they start using them in other situations (Johnson, Christie, and Wardle, 2005). The social learning that takes place during play constitutes an important part of children's experience of constructing and shaping their gender identities (Yelland, 1998). Through their play choices, children enact their understanding of gender as well as further develop their gender identities.

Educators need to be alert that during play children can enact rigid gender roles and limit themselves and their peers by recreating sexist relationships (Office of the Minister for Children (OMC), 2006). The boundaries that stereotypical gendered play creates in children's play choices can have a negative effect on all children as they get excluded from valuable learning experiences.

Such restrictions can be particularly damaging to the well-being of transgender and gender non-conforming children. Most transgender adults recall being aware of their gender identity between the ages of 3- and 5- years old, but not having the vocabulary to express it (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2016). In order to meet the needs of all children, breaking gender boundaries needs to become an integral part of the play experiences children have in early childhood settings.

Building and Crossing Gender Boundaries

Martin (2011) argues that in early childhood settings the gender boundaries in play are set by the child's older or more knowledgeable peers. As a young child enters the setting it is the older children who model gendered play and as the child becomes part of the community of practice of their gender, s/he needs to comply with the gender rules in it to avoid rejection and ridicule. Children would often police each other's adherence to gender roles and statements like "No, this is for girls/boys", are often heard in the classroom and unless an educator intervenes they would have the effect of discouraging some children to engage in any play that breaks the established gender roles. Children negotiate the messages they receive about gender and make decisions in order to develop their own gender identity (MacNaughton, 2000). Adults play an essential role during this process by either establishing or challenging gender stereotypes.

While children can set and police the gender boundaries in preschool, they can also initiate crossing those boundaries. Blaise (2005)

points out the teaching potential such episodes can have by influencing other children in the classroom to extend their own play. Adult's role is to positively acknowledge and support the child who crosses gendered play boundaries. By doing so the educator sends a message to all children that they are in an environment where they can develop their own play without gendered constraints.

The cues children receive as to what is and what is not acceptable in their play choices determine their play opportunities. Weisgram, Fulcher, and Dinella (2014) found that when given masculine toy in pink, girls are more likely to consider it a feminine toy, while the opposite was not observed with boys. They postulate that using colour coding gives girls permission to wander out of their gender boundaries. While pink gives girls permission, any clue of femininity seems to prohibit boys' participation.

Boys might need additional support in crossing gendered play boundaries as they adhere more strongly to their own-sex stereotypes. As a result, this could decrease their opportunities to engage with toys that have the potential to elicit higher levels of play complexity (Cherney and Dempsey, 2010).

Adults need be aware of the "hidden curriculum" (Kelly, 2009, p.10) in the classroom, which communicates meaning to children through the way the school is organised and the type of materials provided. All arrangements made for children make implicit the attitudes and values of the people who make them and have a profound effect on children's understanding of acceptable social and gender roles (Kelly, 2009). In order to avoid any hidden curriculum messages, educators need to examine not only the materials offered to the children but the language used with them, as well as observe closely and determine what changes need to be made, if one gender dominates an area or some toys are used only in stereotypical ways (Martin, 2011). Educators have the power to engage in "expanding children's ways of seeing and doing gender." (MacNaughton, 2000, p.33) They can

challenge sexism by direct involvement in the children's play storylines, by creating shared stories for boys and girls and most importantly by supporting children crossing traditional gender boundaries.

Crossing Gender Boundaries as Part of Quality Early Childhood Education

Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) points out the importance of offering children opportunities to cross the gender boundaries with adults supporting all children to both explore and take risks and exhibit caring behaviours. This includes encouraging non-stereotypical play, ensuring equal access to all materials and providing challenging physical activities for boys and girls.

Siolta (Centre for Early Childhood Development & Education, 2007) goes a step further and acknowledges the need to not only encourage children to cross boundaries but challenge children's and adults' gender stereotypes and respond appropriately to any biased behaviour.

The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (DCYA, 2016) also encourages educators to explore gender actively in their early childhood settings, to offer children non-stereotypical materials and support children to enter opposite-sex activities. It emphasises the need for educators to reflect on their own unconscious gender beliefs and examine their provision through an extensive list of critical questions to consider.

The extent to which educators succeed in that role depends on their understanding of the causes of typical play. They are less likely to challenge children's understanding of gender if they believe it is the result of biological differences (MacNaughton, 2000; Chapman, 2016). In contrast, if educators perceive typical play as caused by gender roles or stereotypes, they are more likely to plan each experience in a way that will be inclusive of all children (Chapman, 2016).

Examining one's own knowledge of gender development and unconscious bias is crucial if educators are to adequately recognise and challenge a detrimental stereotypical play. The teachers' beliefs of gendered play in early childhood, more often than not, reinforce gendered play rather than challenge it with widely spread beliefs that dramatic play is more suitable for girls than boys (Lynch, 2015).

Educator's values and unconscious bias in regards to gender need to be examined not only because they create and influence the environment and play opportunities in the setting, but because they support the families of the children in their care and have the responsibility to respectfully challenge any stereotypes and bias expressed by both children and adults.

It is not possible to establish how prepared early childhood educators are for this role having in mind that 7% of all people working directly with young children in Ireland have no qualifications and only 20% have a level 7 or above qualifications (Pobal, 2017). No data exist on the extent to which educators have been trained in equality and diversity in the early years, under which umbrella gender is discussed.

International research shows that educators find it challenging to address gender issues with parents and carers, they are uncertain of parents' reactions which vary from support to antagonism and feel that they do not have strategies to change the opinion of unsupportive parents (MacNaughton, 2000; Emilson, Folkesson, & Lindberg, 2016).

Another challenge that educators point out is the pressure to conform to parental expectations due to funding (MacNaughton, 2000). Even though the views of Irish educators have not been researched, this consideration can be applied to the Irish context where nearly two-thirds of educators are being employed in private settings that operate as businesses and put parents in the position of customers of the childcare setting (Pobal, 2017).

Adequate and universal support to educators is required if they are to translate policy into practice and meet the needs of the children in their care who want or need to extend their gender discourses through play. Educators need to be aware of the gender issues in the early childhood classroom in order to challenge children building gender boundaries in play and support the ones crossing them. The role parents and carers play in establishing or challenging stereotypes should also be addressed by giving educators strategies for opening a discussion about gender issues with parents and carers.

Conclusion

Children are not born with knowledge of gender roles but develop it in the first years of their lives. Adults can either challenge or reinforce the bias that might underline gendered play, by doing so they either give permission to or prohibit children to be themselves in how they approach play. There is a need for access to specific training and support for educators to actively challenge gender roles in the classroom. In addition, strategies to engage parents and carers in discussions around gendered play can help educators support the children in their care and their families. Even though the policies in place in the ECE sector are committed to supporting children's development of non-stereotypical gender discourses in play, the educators who translate policies into practice need to overcome the existing challenges in order to make a lasting change in the way gender is understood in the early childhood classroom.

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Play and autism

The power of play to promote wellbeing

Lisha O'Sullivan, Emer Ring and Kathleen Horgan

Children with autism spectrum differences (ASD) play in their own unique ways and differences between children with ASD and neurotypical children include differences in spontaneous play, social play and pretend play (Jarrold and Conn, 2011). In this article we use the term 'autism spectrum difference' rather than 'autism spectrum disorder' to avoid conceptualising children's abilities and needs from a negative and deficient perspective (Ring, McKenna and Wall, 2015). Findings from a recent national evaluation of education provision for children with ASD suggest that children with ASD see opportunities to play as an important feature of their educational experience (Daly and Ring et al., 2016). We argue that the observed differences in the play of children with ASD are not commensurate with a lack of motivation to play or a capacity to benefit from play. Amid increasing concerns for child wellbeing at policy level (Smyth, 2015), the authors suggest that opportunities for child-directed play should be an integral feature of education programmes for children with ASD, given the power of play to support wellbeing and children's connections with others.

Introduction

Children learn and develop through play and play is associated with a range of emotional, social, cognitive and academic gains (Bonfield and Horgan, 2016). While children clearly benefit when teachers intentionally use play as a context to work towards curriculum learning goals, they also benefit from opportunities to direct their own play. Research consistently indicates that self-directed play contributes to emotional well-being and connections with others (Gray, 2015). The autobiographical accounts of adults with ASD further emphasise the importance child-directed play for well-being and connecting with others during childhood (Conn, 2015; 2016). However, a preoccupation with outcomes coupled with a tight schedule of interventions, can lead to reduced opportunities for play in educational programmes for children with ASD (Mastrangelo, 2009). Moreover, the research

suggests that children with ASD in mainstream educational settings can experience social isolation, loneliness and rejection (Chamberlain, Kasari and Rotheram-Fuller, 2007). Child-directed play offers a powerful mechanism through which these challenges can be overcome.

Difference or Disorder?

Up until the recent publication of The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V) (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013), autism or autistic spectrum disorder was described as being identified by a triad of impairments in social interaction, patterns of communication and flexibility of thought and behaviour (Ring et al., 2015). While the current classification system also includes these areas, a further welcome dimension refers to a child's hyper/hypo reactivity to sensory input or an unusual interest in sensory-related aspects of the environment. The concept of 'disorder' as a defining feature of autism continues to be challenged by individuals with autism and their families who describe their experiences in terms of 'difference' (Greene, 2006). In accordance with the position adopted by Ring, Daly and Wall (2018), this article rejects 'disorder' in favour of 'difference' and maintains a focus on the role of parents and educators in responding to, and accommodating these differences through optimising children's access to play.

Are Children with Autism Spectrum Differences Motivated to Play?

Prior to exploring the motivation of children with ASD to engage in play, we need to be clear around what play actually entails. Gray (2013), conceptualises play as a motive characterised by choice, a means over ends focus, imagination, self-chosen rules and an active, non-stressed mind-set. Once afforded the opportunity, children with ASD certainly act autonomously even if this involves pursuing a more constricted range of interests. When children with ASD engage in preferred activities, it is the activity itself (means)

rather than any external reward (ends) which motivates them. Much of the play experienced by children with ASD, however, can be adult rather than child-controlled (Mastrangelo, 2009; Conn, 2015). Play involves self-chosen rules which can be observed in the play of children with ASD when they make up rules around how objects are organised or how games are played. Pretend play is highly imaginative, and spontaneous generation of pretence is recognised as challenging for children with ASD (Jarrold and Conn, 2011). Jarrold and Conn (2011), propose a performance rather than competence deficit meaning that children with ASD can engage in pretence but for several reasons, are less motivated to do so. The autobiographical literature provides further evidence that many children with ASD both engage in and enjoy pretence even if it is less improvisational than the pretence of neurotypical children (Conn, 2015). Many children with ASD are competent at using visual media to represent their imagination and the exceptional drawing abilities of some children with ASD are well documented (Scott, 2013; Ring et al., 2015). This suggests that for children with ASD who find pretending difficult, other symbolic forms of play, such as play with visual media, might offer a more accessible mode of expression and communication. However, this is not to dismiss the value of teaching pretend play skills given the contribution of this type of play to language, self-regulation, symbolic thinking and emotional well-being (O' Sullivan and Ring, 2016). Finally, when the conditions support them to do so, children with ASD can demonstrate an active non-stressed mind-set when they become deeply absorbed in activities. The autobiographies of adults with ASD suggest, however, that the extent of absorption in sensory play activities can go somewhat beyond that experienced by neurotypical children with many recalling difficulties disengaging from such activities (Conn, 2015; 2016). Supporting children with ASD framing their play experiences may be of particular pedagogical relevance in this regard. Overall, it is clear that children with ASD demonstrate the motive or attitude we define as play and can benefit from play in several ways.

Consequently, including play in their curriculum should be an educational priority.

The Perspectives of Children with Autism Spectrum Differences on Play

As part of a mixed methods national evaluation of education provision for children with ASD at early years, primary and post-primary levels in mainstream and special education settings (in which one of the present authors was a principal investigator), conversations were conducted with groups of children, augmented by a draw-and-tell approach (Daly and Ring et al., 2016). Data were collected across 24 sites representing the continuum of education provision available for children with ASD from pre-school through to secondary school (see Daly and Ring et al., 2016 for further detail on the sampling framework adopted). Across these sites 29 child conversations were conducted with 41 children. The inclusion of the drawing activity embraced an approach, which was non-hierarchical, inter-subjective and potentially collaborative while affording participants the opportunity to articulate their views in a non-verbal and concrete way (Lewis, 2003). As the images in Figure 1 and Figure 2, illustrate, children with ASD saw opportunities to play, particularly outdoors with friends, as an important part of their educational experience.

The conversations with children provided further evidence of the importance of play in these children's education experiences. One child spoke of enjoying being able to 'play with people in yard' while another who drew a picture of the school playground and described each piece of equipment and his favourite places in the playground as he drew. The findings from this research contest the view that children with ASD are less motivated to engage in play, particularly in social play with peers. Critically it suggests that the reason many children with ASD engage less frequently in play is, more related to social, communicative, cognitive and sensory differences than to a lack of motivation per se. Participants in this research clearly



Figure 1: Child at Middle-Primary Level in School Yard with Friends during Breaktime



Figure 2: Child in a Senior Class in a Special School with Friends at School

valued the contribution of play to their emotional well-being and to their opportunities to connect with others. Acknowledging that wellbeing is a 'multidimensional construct' (Smyth, 2015:1), nevertheless the clear influence of social and emotional relationships on wellbeing is clearly communicated in children's responses and drawings.

Play and Emotional Wellbeing

For play to promote emotional well-being children need to be offered genuine choice, opportunities to practice self-control, a variety of ways to represent ideas and time and space to become absorbed in activities. Crucially, play as an intrinsically motivating activity should not be accompanied by rewards or external evaluation (Gray, 2013). In terms of the type of play which promotes wellbeing, the autobiographical literature suggests that sensory based play activities, in particular, can be associated with feelings of security and wellbeing (Conn, 2015). Spinning, listening to gravel, following the lines of a fence are all examples of experiences recalled as having been deeply pleasurable by adults with ASD (Conn, 2016). It seems that children with ASD value opportunities to make sense of their world through their sensory interactions with it (Conn, 2015; 2016). Consequently, freely chosen play can support wellbeing in a differential way to

teacher structured play activities and therapeutic interventions through allowing children engage in play which is pleasurable rather than play which is instrumental in achieving external goals. While the type of play which promotes wellbeing and allows children with ASD make meaning of their world might appear different to the play which meets these needs in neurotypical children, children with ASD are entitled to enjoy the type of play experiences which meet their unique emotional needs. Where the curriculum privileges a narrow range of play experiences, to potential of play to promote wellbeing may not be fully realised for children with ASD (Jarrold & Conn, 2011).

Play and Connections with Others

Children with ASD experience challenges understanding, initiating and maintaining social interactions with others (Papacek, Chai and Green, 2015). They are not less motivated to play with others or to develop friendships, they may simply have a different way of being with others and of being friends (Jarrold and Conn, 2011). Physical proximity, for example, might be more important for some children with ASD than a mental form of companionship (Chamberlain et al., 2007). The autobiographical literature also suggests that despite finding socialising incredibly demanding, many adults with ASD

recount their desire for friendship during their childhood years (Conn, 2015; 2016). Teachers generally use a range of strategies to support children with ASD developing communication and social skills and to support peers developing understanding, empathy and tolerance of the diverse interests and behaviours of children with ASD (Papacek et al., 2015). Moreover, through the provision of resources and activities which expand upon individual interests, teachers can encourage children to engage in play which contributes more to learning and social involvement. There is evidence to suggest that incorporating restricted interests can actually decrease stereotypy and increase functional play and social play (Josefi and Ryan, 2004; Watkins et al., 2017). Many adults with ASD report recall finding it easier to socialise with those peers who shared their own interests in some way (Conn, 2015). Given the diversity of children's social and communicative differences, observation and assessment are crucial to matching support to the needs of the learner (Ring et al., 2015). In the absence of adequate supports for children with ASD, the quality and range of connections with their peers decrease with age. However, opportunities for play remain both important and essential throughout early years, primary and post-primary education (Rotheram-Fuller; Kasari, Chamberlain and Locke, 2010).

Conclusion

From the perspective of the development of the whole child, social and emotional development are as important as cognitive development which is often and inappropriately given priority. Cognitive development and associated academic success are, in fact, dependent on emotional well-being and connections with others in the learning community (Deci and Ryan, 2008; Whitebread and Coltman, 2011). Child-directed play makes a unique contribution to these important aspects of development and should be a core feature of educational provision for children with ASD. As play becomes more dominant in educational provision, educators in collaboration with parents need to reflect

critically on the purposes for which play is cultivated. While play-based interventions are an invaluable part of educational programmes for children with ASD, they clearly need to be balanced with opportunities for child-directed play. Opportunities for children to direct their own play make a powerful contribution to emotional well-being which is critical to overall learning success. As skill generalisation is a key aim of curricula for children with ASD, child-directed play can complement teacher-led activities as it gives children with ASD an invaluable context in which to practice emerging social and communication skills. Children participating in the national evaluation (Daly and Ring et al., 2016) provided constructive insights into the power of play to support their emotional well-being and connections with others. The voices of these children and the emerging research should be considered by policy makers, educators and parents to increase the responsivity of the curriculum to children's needs, particularly their needs in relation to emotional wellbeing and connections with others.

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Adolescents need play too

**Applying interventions
to support social
communication of girls
with autism in
mainstream schools**

Sheila Cross

Background

Play is widely recognised as an important feature in the education and overall development of a child (Kossvaki and Papoudi, 2016) whereby social and cognitive skills such as problem solving, turn-taking, sharing and cooperating with others can develop (Lindsey, 2014). During play social language is supported and self-esteem, emotional development (Goleniowska, 2014) and friendships can be constructed. How we define play is open to interpretation as it is a complex and ambiguous concept (Eberle, 2014) which encompasses a range of human experiences.

Children with disabilities and those with autism often engage in restrictive play activities when compared to their typically developing peers (Wolfberg, Bottema-Beutel, and De Witt 2012). This is due to the nature of autism, a lifelong disability characterised with difficulties in communication, social interaction and by the presence of restrictive interests and behaviours (Duffy and Healy, 2011; APA, 2013). In addition, engaging in play may be hindered for those with autism as many exhibit difficulties in sensory processing (Case-Smith, Weaver and Fristad, 2015) and in symbolic thinking (Wing and Gould 1979), which is evident from early infancy (Charman, Swettenham, Baron Cohen, Cox, Baird and Drew 1997).

As defined by Wolfberg (1999), play involves engaging in voluntary and inherently motivated activities which are linked with recreational pleasure and enjoyment. This interpretation of play may therefore include leisure activities experienced by adolescents.

Adolescents with autism, and more specifically adolescent girls with autism, are considered vulnerable to increased social demands and the complexities of social interaction (Jamison and Schuttler, 2015). This may be due to male adolescent relationships being largely based on 'doing' whereas female adolescent relationships involve more conversing (Nicholas, Moraveik and Tetenbaum 2009). Within school, older children

with autism who are cognitively able experience significant social challenges, displaying limited social encounters with peers (Dean, Kasari, Shih, Frankel, Whitney, Landa et al 2014). Challenges are associated with difficulties recognising subtle social cues and emotions of others i.e. deficits in Theory of Mind (Baron-Cohen, Leslie and Frith, 1985), an incapability to take another's viewpoint, leading to naive reactions and hypersensitivity in social situations.

Combining a range of play and leisure intervention strategies to support the development of social communication skills are important for adolescents with autism across their lifespan.

Objectives

This article describes a transdisciplinary approach with three adolescent girls with autism who attend mainstream school settings. The approach involved blending key psychosocial interventions through the introduction of 'play' activities to develop and support essential communication and social skills.

Method

Design

A multiple case study design was employed with six months follow up.

Ethics

Informed consent to report and publish information was sought in accordance with Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) research procedures from all adolescents, caregivers and professionals at school.

Participants

Three females aged thirteen to seventeen years (Ashley, Amanda and Noleen) were referred to Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA). To protect the identity of participants and to ensure confidentiality and anonymity pseudonym's have been applied.

Ashley is a thirteen-year-old girl who was referred to MCA due to selective mutism. She did not engage with teachers or peers, refusing to complete or participate in class tasks. Ashley could be articulate and had an extensive knowledge of a range of topics, however, her expressive communication was affected by her anxiety. Ashley experienced difficulties with another student and in the absence of adaptive skills to cope, withdrew at home and school. Her interests were restricted to books, animals and art and she struggled to participate in less preferred activities.

Amanda is a fifteen-year-old girl with autism, reactive attachment disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). She was referred to MCA due to elevated levels of anxiety related to transitioning to another school and a family bereavement. Continuous behavioural difficulties at home and community settings, combined with a deterioration in communicative abilities, when stressed and anxious, led to verbal processing difficulties within school. Amanda had a strong rigidity of thought, low self-esteem and experienced sensory processing difficulties. Amanda enjoyed communicating and wished to improve her peer relationships as interactions often resulted in negative peer reactions. Amanda had an interest in books and films but played with childhood toys and games. Gross motor difficulties proved challenging when participating in physical activities.

Noleen is a seventeen-year-old girl who was not accessing the curriculum appropriately. She was creative and interested in art. Noleen had extensive vocabulary with articulate verbal skills, however this deteriorated when she was upset. Noleen engaged in little spontaneous conversation with peers experiencing heightened anxiety in social situations and only engaging in relaxed conversation at home. Noleen rarely made eye contact and spoke in a low tone. She attended few family social outings except church. Noleen was aware of her autism diagnosis and its impact on her social and learning potential, expressing that difficulties included concentrating at school and being self-critical of

her abilities especially her art. Noleen neglected areas of personal care and found it difficult to cope with unexpected change in the classroom triggering behaviours which challenge.

All of the adolescents referred required social skills support using 'play' based activities to help improve their social communication skills with school peers.

Transdisciplinary Intervention Programme

The transdisciplinary model involves any member of the Learning Support team within MCA acting as a lead Coordinator. The Coordinator capitalises on the experience of a team of professionals comprising teachers, speech and language therapists, autism intervention officers and occupational therapists. This model allows for skills to be transferred between team members, extending traditional roles and working in a coordinated way with one another, across three school terms, with each adolescent, their caregivers and other educational and health professionals. During an initial observation period of ten to twelve weeks, the Coordinator in conjunction with other transdisciplinary team members, assesses and addresses identified needs, strengths and challenges across home, school and community environments. A Learning Support Plan is subsequently established, outlining the development of a holistic intervention supporting the adolescent, their family and educational and health professionals working in the school setting (See Tables 1 to 3).

Baseline Description	Goal set	Strategies/Resources employed
When stressed, Ashley found it difficult to communicate with others especially when routines changed, she had low self-esteem and was easily distracted.	To communicate with school staff and peers when required and to speak aloud when doing so.	Utilised high-preference leisure items and activities such as art and board games. A board game involved counting points from 1-10 for demonstration of target behaviours. The points were rewarded with a desired leisure activity such as reading a magazine or going for an ice-cream.
When under stress communicative abilities deteriorated. Difficulty tolerating crowded and noisy environments	Learn strategies to manage stress, including feelings of anger, sadness and anxiety.	Direct teaching and raising awareness of the benefits of participating in leisure activities such as art, using construction resources and exercises to help feel 'calm'. Teaching through using a 'tool box' from the Exploring Feelings programme by Dr Tony Attwood
Interests restricted to books, animals and art, struggled to participate in less preferred leisure and self-care activities.	To promote independent living skills and self-care in the home environment.	Ashley went for walks, played sports, went to yoga and swimming initially with parental support and MCA Co-ordinator. Points / reward resources required to carry out leisure activity.

Table 1: Examples of leisure strategies employed to develop social communication skills with Ashley.

Baseline Description	Goal set	Strategies/Resources employed
Difficulties with impulse control and found social interaction anxiety provoking. For example, Amanda would repeatedly text a friend several times if she had not heard back from them.	To develop social skills and positive relationships with peers in school.	Drawing on Amanda's interests in books and films activities such as video modelling and role playing were employed. Reading books such as 'Social Fortune or Social Fate: A Social Thinking Graphic Novel Map for Social Quest Seeker's, this comic book by Pamela Crooke and Michelle Garcia- Winner adopted a playful way to highlight two different points of view. Student workshops with peers were established increasing awareness and understanding of autism. School staff kept records when pro-social behaviour and positive social skills were displayed and when Amanda experienced difficulties. This helped to individualise intervention content.
Regularly presented with behaviours that challenged. Triggered when demands were placed on her she felt anxious, was unsure of what was expected from her or when she felt unwell.	Promote the consistent use of adaptive strategies to regulate emotions, during times of stress and anxiety. Amanda will reflect on positive experiences.	A range of regulating exercises were demonstrated to maintain a calm and alert state. These were shared within home and school using visuals (5 point emotional scale) and breathing exercises which acted as a relaxation/leisure activity.
At school behavioural presentations differed from home particularly when trying to fit in with peers she often scratched her skin.	Amanda will recognise the changes that occur in physiology, thinking, behaviour and speech when she is feeling anxious, angry or stressed.	Took part in female exercise classes, and kept a memory book, detailing positive activities completed.
Amanda also had a negative mindset and feared things would happen.		Considering Amanda's interest in films, video footage to identify feelings and changes in others was used as a leisure activity in addition to role-playing scenarios.

Table 2: Examples of some leisure strategies employed to develop social communication skills with Amanda.

Baseline Description	Goal set	Strategies/Resources employed
Engaged in very little spontaneous conversation with peers. Presents with anxiety in social situations. Only engaged in relaxed conversation at home.	To become more comfortable with social interaction by engaging in spontaneous interaction with a peer or adult in school each week	Social Skills workshops were set up with 3 peers. Utilised the Attention Autism (AA) Post Primary Model by Gina Davis. Using dramatic and visual activities. Objects/activities used were age appropriate and motivating drawing upon Noleen's interests e.g. drawing still art, spinning paint, Inflating balloons. At home, comic strip conversations were used to help with anxiety. Henry OT 'Tools for Teens' resource used to introduce the importance of exercise and movement.
Noleen rarely went on any social outings. Never ate out in public and ate very little at school limiting social communication opportunities.	Build confidence in weekly social skills groups at school and at home, leading to eating out once a month. Noleen will begin with preferred food and tolerating the environment for 10 minutes, building upon this.	Attended weekly social skills groups in school increasing social outings. Capitalising on her interest in books, Noleen was encouraged to keep a diary to plan outings and to read about other girls' social experiences who have Asperger syndrome. Support was provided from MCA staff preparing outings using activity worksheets based on principals of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.

Table 3: Examples of some strategies and supports used to develop social communication skills with Noleen.

Outcome Measures

The transdisciplinary model commences with a period of formal and informal assessment with the individual with autism, caregivers and professionals working with the young person within the school and community. In collaboration with caregivers and teachers, the Coordinator creates an individualised child centred set of goals and a tailored intervention programme to facilitate achievement of each goal.

Once intervention commences the Coordinator liaises regularly with all relevant parties, across settings reviewing and monitoring progress.

Six months following intervention, semi-structured interviews are conducted with caregivers and where possible the young person with autism. This allows participants to express their views on intervention effectiveness and how the process has affected their home and school environments. Education and health professionals involved in the intervention process are also invited to complete a self-report questionnaire evaluating intervention effectiveness, strategies, support and advice employed by MCA.

Results

Ashley

School staff reported that Ashley now speaks freely to her Classroom Assistant and can verbalise if she needs to leave the class when feeling anxious and explains why she is stressed or anxious. School staff report that Ashley is more interactive with her peers, has cooperatively worked with a peer on a project, speaking throughout. She also speaks aloud to almost all her teachers and recorded a full presentation for her English Teacher on an iPad. Ashley continues to require support, guidance and reinforcement to increase her fluency when speaking to teachers however progress has been made.

Amanda

During one to one intervention sessions Amanda demonstrated an elevated level of insight into the impact her behaviour had on the reactions of her peers. Areas such as repeatedly saying “hello” to peers, asking irrelevant questions in class, and feeling worried that peers were looking at her were discussed. Using visual supports such as comic strips and social stories and engaging in exercise classes Amanda has been supported to regulate her emotions and these have helped her with her social communication difficulties. Although Amanda continues to have difficulties with impulse control and still finds social interaction anxiety provoking, she benefits from having time to discuss social interactions with adults.

Amanda's peers completed a peer awareness session on autism. Both Amanda and school staff report an increase in peer supportiveness because of the awareness sessions.

Noleen

The MCA Coordinator reported that Noleen attended and participated fully in all social group skills activities. Noleen also joined her peers on a trip to a local community centre and on walks to the local shop, her first time to have been on a school trip.

Within the home environment, the Coordinator supported Noleen in candle and jewelry making with a sibling. Both the Coordinator and her parents reported that Noleen was very relaxed and open to conversation and social interaction. School staff also reiterated this openness to communicate.

Six Month Follow-up

Ashley

Ashley's Classroom Assistant reported that interaction with peers has improved. Using visuals makes things definite for her at school and she is more aware of her emotions.

Ashley's mother reported improvements in her daughter's social communication skills, indicating that she has started to speak and learn more. This she felt was attributed to her emotional understanding which resulted in her being calmer at home and at school. Ashley's mother stated that:

"...before Ashely was alone there was no enjoyment and no engagement. She is more helpful and enjoys everything much more. She is more social now whereas before she just went to her room. She now helps me with cooking and cleaning, my daughter is back and is happier".

Amanda

Amanda's teacher reported that although Amanda still struggles to form friendships her social skills have improved, as she has a greater understanding of her autism and her emotions. The awareness workshops have given her peers a greater understanding of how Amanda's autism impacts on her behaviours and difficulties in forming relationships. Some of her peers now actively attempt to include her within the class group.

Noleen

Noleen's parents reported that she is equipped with new coping skills. The entire family and the school have benefited having learned helpful guidelines for and about Noleen. Building a trusting relationship with the Coordinator helped and as a result her interests have extended, to eating out and shopping. Parents also reported moderate improvements in Noleen's social skills such as her ability to converse and approach others.

Conclusions

Lacking social and communication "know how" amongst adolescents with autism can result in heightened anxiety within school and home environments. This can result in increased cognitive and practical impairments. The evidence reported in this research indicates that adopting a range of play and leisure strategies delivered via a transdisciplinary approach centering on the strengths, interests and needs of each young person can support and improve this area of deficit.

Including and educating peers also positively helps raise awareness and knowledge of autism whilst offering opportunities to forge peer relationships which may otherwise prove difficult for the young person with autism.

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Outdoor Play Experiences of preschool children with autism spectrum disorder in Ireland

Julie Sexton, Aine Blake and Helen Lynch

Introduction

Access to active, outdoor, or free play is recommended for a child's optimal development (Tremblay, et al., 2015), and play is the means through which a child can learn about and understand the world (White, 2011). Children consistently report on the fundamental importance of play in their lives (e.g. Coyne, Dempsey and Comiskey, 2012; Horgan, O'Riordan, Martin and O'Sullivan, 2017). However, for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), little is known about their play experiences and in particular, their experiences of outdoor play (Lynch, 2017).

Literature has pointed to differences in play between children with ASD and typically developing children (e.g. Szabo, 2014; Williams, Reddy and Costall, 2001). Consequently, there may be differences also in their outdoor experience. Research specific to this population is needed if we are to develop a better understanding of the place of play in their worlds. This will help develop a broader understanding of outdoor play, its challenges and value, and will support communities to facilitate play opportunities of children with ASD.

Background to the study and the outdoor environment

This study presents a synopsis of a project undertaken in 2017, to explore the outdoor play experiences of preschool children with ASD, in the context of their homes and preschool setting. One preschool ASD unit, situated in a local primary school setting in a rural area in Munster was recruited for the research. This preschool contained modern, well-equipped, outdoor playspaces: a small garden by the classroom, and larger shared playground area. The preschool children had opportunities to play together in the classroom garden, or in a more integrated setting in the playground. The playground was unusual for many primary schools in that it contained various playground components such as a slide, spinner and rocker,

which provided many play opportunities for the children. Furthermore, living in a rural location was conducive to the children also having access to the natural outdoor experiences.

Methods

A qualitative, multimethod approach was used to generate data over eight weeks from three different participant groups: six preschool children, five mothers of the children, and six preschool staff (two teachers and four Special Needs Assistants). As the children were mainly non-verbal, parents and preschool staff were selected as interviewees, as advocates for the children, to support an understanding of their play routines and preferences. One semi-structured interview was undertaken with each parent either at their own home or at the school. A focus group was undertaken with the six staff members at the school. Then, two school visits were conducted to observe the children at play in outdoor spaces at the preschool setting and to engage them in a number of projective-technique-based indoor activities (a card-sorting task and play dough activity). Audio and video-recordings were taken of interviews and observations to allow verbatim transcription and ensure data integrity. Data were thematically analysed by both researchers. Codes were generated through thorough review and reflection upon the data using tables to compare and contrast multiple data sets. Analysis of the combined data sets enabled researchers to gain insights into the meaning of outdoor play for these children, beyond their limited capacities for communicating through language. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants' identities.

Findings

1. Play is about choice and personal autonomy

The freedom experienced when playing outdoors emerged as a key theme. Given the choice, many

of the child participants showed preference for being outdoors rather than indoors, with parents commenting that they would “stay out there all day”. This enjoyment of playing outdoors was confirmed during researcher’s observations when the children actively engaged in various ways in their outdoor environment. For some, the outdoors was a site for sensory play. This became evident in their preferential use of certain playground elements such as the spinning cup and sand-box. Noah, for example, loved running the sand through his fingers. The natural environment also offered sensory experiences, such as the wind blowing and leaves fluttering on the ground, and these features characterised the play of some of the children. Niall’s mother, for example, described how “he puts his head up so that the rain goes on his face”. Physical activity play was also a feature for some. Ethan’s mother described how family trips to the woods were undertaken weekly to satiate Ethan’s boundless energy and love of outdoor exploration. Eoin liked climbing particularly, and scaled the preschool playground climbing frame with ease. From this heightened position, Eoin liked to observe the happenings in other parts of the playground. Noah, meanwhile, liked the slide, and used it in different ways: sliding down, climbing up, and lying at the bottom. In the freedom of the outdoors, children had the opportunity to “do their own thing”, and were afforded a sense of power, described by one mother as “he likes to

rules the outdoors”. As well as having freedom to play their own games, the children were involved in the play of others, at times independently, but also through the guided support of adults: preschool staff at the school, and primarily parents at home. At school, organised games like Duck-Duck-Goose were a source of enjoyment to many. Liam for example was seen jumping and laughing with excitement during a game. The outdoors provided space for interactive games with lots of movement, running and catching, without necessarily high language requirements. At home, siblings and neighbours were natural companions for outdoor play. Parents commented how outdoor play strengthened relationships between siblings who discovered shared interests, for example playing with water guns or using the trampoline. Pets also featured frequently as outdoor companions.

2. Opportunities for outdoor play: environments and participation

The children’s opportunities to participate in outdoor play emerged as a second theme. At the preschool, the outdoors featured strongly in the daily routine. Access to the two outdoor play sites at the preschool offered a variety of affordances. For example, the sand-table in the garden provided for group-play and the manipulation of different materials, elements such as a slide and climbing frame in the playground provided



Figure 1. I like to explore the plants and dig in the earth.



Figure 2. I like to watch and touch the fluttering leaves.

opportunity to crawl, to run, to slide, to plan and execute gross motor tasks. Apart from those opportunities at school, parents identified other outdoor locations to which their child had access. They included their own garden, neighbourhood parks, woods and beaches. Parents generally highly valued the outdoors for, among other things, its anticipated health benefits for their child, and this influenced the extent of its presence in their child's life. On the other hand, the publicity of being outside generated some parental concerns and self-consciousness around how their child was perceived by others: that their child's behaviour might be seen as 'abnormal' by onlookers. Some parents reported experiencing negative reactions from strangers, which negatively impacted their desire and capacity to attend such outdoor locations.

3. Power of outdoor play

In the educational setting of the preschool, staff members recognised that being outdoors had a significant impact on the children's behaviour. Behaviour improved not only during outdoor play, but its effect was seen to extend to the classroom, impacting their indoor attention and focus, and having a lasting modulating effect on their behaviour. Parents agreed on similar results at home.

Discussion and conclusions

This study used a multimethod approach to gather data from three different groups: preschool children, mothers of the children, and preschool staff, in order to understand children's play preferences and experiences. Overall, children in this study highly valued being outdoors for play, where they engaged primarily in unstructured, free-play. For children with ASD, their lives are typically highly routinised and scheduled, so these findings highlight the need to also facilitate time for outdoor play as a means of providing opportunities for free-play more effectively.

Outdoor play took many forms for these children and meant different things for different children.

However, of particular note was the preference for sensory play. Several situations were observed when a child appeared particularly captivated with the sensory characteristics of an activity. As noted in other studies, sensory play can feature as a significant play form/preference for children with ASD (Conn, 2015). Interestingly, most children in this study did not demonstrate sensory-avoiding behaviours during outdoor play, which would also be typical for children with ASD. Overall, the sensory aspect of outdoor play was identified as requiring more attention in terms of designing for the children's play preferences and needs. Components that incorporate sight, sound, touch, movement, and complexity to varying degrees are important to facilitate participation for children with ASD in sensory play (Sachs and Vincenta, 2011). While Irish education settings take this into account indoors through sensory rooms, this aspect of outdoor play needs more focused attention.

Another significant finding was the promotion of social dimensions of play and the premise that play can be nurtured. Parents in this study strongly desired that their children develop play skills, not so much for themselves, but so that they could play with others and be included in play situations at home, at school, and in their communities. Children in this study, found playmates among peers at school, and in school integrated play was routinely scheduled with typically developing peers in the playground. This was seen to encourage play progression and development of skills important for social play (McConnell, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Findings highlighted the value of the 'safe space' that the ASD preschool unit in a mainstream school can offer, with opportunity for supported play in the unit, combined with integration with typically developing children. Further research into enabling play in these contrasting settings would be a valuable contribution.

However, social play in communities was more challenging. Although free-play was valued by adults, the children's ability to engage in community free-play was shaped by community experiences of what constitutes 'acceptable

play' in public. This was a particular issue for community playgrounds. Parents reported that community playgrounds were more difficult to access, and were places where they sometimes experienced exclusion, which highlights issues of stigma (Farrugia, 2009). For parents, parental reasoning guided their decisions to intervene (Lynch, Hayes and Ryan, 2016): sometimes leaving their child to play freely, and other times scaffolding more socially acceptable ways of playing when in community settings. It seems that for children with ASD, adults experience a tension between how best to enable play that is self-initiated, and internally motivating, yet also meets their needs for social inclusion. Thus, infrastructural supports both for adults and communities in general are required if we are to maximize opportunities for children with ASD to participate in social play in integrated contexts as well as freedom to engage in outdoor free-play.

Future research needs to develop clear and coherent guidelines for developing challenging playspaces that foster social inclusion and afford a range of play opportunities and experiences for all children (Moore and Lynch, 2015), including those with ASD.

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Outdoor and risky play

The use of outdoor play spaces in ECCE centres

Gretta Murphy

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate if the outdoors was used in early childhood care and education (ECCE) centres to enhance learning opportunities. Children value outdoor play (Hart, 1979; Clarke and Moss, 2001; 2005, Kernan, 2006; Wait, 2007; Start Strong, 2010), and as key stakeholders in early education their voice is significant in planning outdoor play spaces. In spite of the growing interest in the outdoors, evidence from a joint inspection report indicated that access to outdoor are still limited in some centres (HSE/DES Joint Inspectorate Report, October 2012). This study attempts, in a small way, to address the need to raise awareness of the value of the outdoors in early childhood education by examining the use of outdoors in ECCE centres.

Methodology

A questionnaire was circulated to all ECCE centres in a county in the south east of Ireland. The sample included a mix of urban rural, community and private centres. At the time of the study there were ninety eight centres in the chosen county. It was designed to elicit how practitioners in ECCE centres use their outdoor space and to extract information in relation to the design and construction of that space. Included in the questionnaire were two five point Likert scales, designed to measure participant's (ECCE practitioner's) awareness of the use of the outdoor space and open ended questions were included. Data analysis was conducted by means of the statistics programme SPSS.

Throughout the process of this study, the ethical guidelines of St Patrick's College Drumcondra were followed. An application for ethical approval was submitted to St Patricks College research ethics committee. Although there was little in the way of sensitive material gathered in the study, confidentiality was guaranteed and respondents were asked not to put their names on the questionnaires, in this way anonymity was protected.

Questionnaires were circulated to ninety eight ECCE centres, eighty one were returned giving an eighty two percent return rate.

Findings

An initial key finding was that in three of the centres surveyed, there was an absence of any outdoor play space at all, as part of their premises. However, the large majority 96% had an outdoor play space.

The Likert scales measured two critical factors which together indicated how outdoors was being used to enhance learning opportunities. The total scores for the Likert questions were calculated and a new variable for each was created for further examination. The new variables were created to signify a broad overall use of the outdoor space (LIK1) and the perception of the role of the practitioner in outdoor play and learning (LIK2). The mean of both scales was then calculated. In the case of LIK1 findings indicated that the centres used their outdoor space well but not to the maximum. In the case of LIK2 findings indicated a high level of awareness of the role of the practitioner in outdoor play and learning.

The relationship between the use of the outdoor space and learning, was the central focus of this study. The Likert scales helped to further examine this by means of a correlation analysis which was conducted between the two variables of 'LIK 1' and 'LIK 2'.

Analysis indicated a weak but positive correlation between the use of the outdoors play space and the role of the practitioners in outdoor play and learning. This indicated that as understanding of the role of practitioner in outdoor play and learning increases, so too does the use of the outdoor play space. The analysis indicates that the correlation is statistically significant (i.e. $p < 0.05$) meaning that the pattern observed is less likely to be due to chance. This indicated that the outdoor play spaces in this study group are used to support learning as measured by these two scales.

	LIK 1	LIK 2
Pearson Correlation	1	.259*
LIK 1 Sig. (2-tailed)		.020
N	81	81
Pearson Correlation	.259*	1
LIK 2 Sig. (2-tailed)	.020	
N	81	81

Table 1 above details the correlation analysis and shows a positive correlation score of 0.259.

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

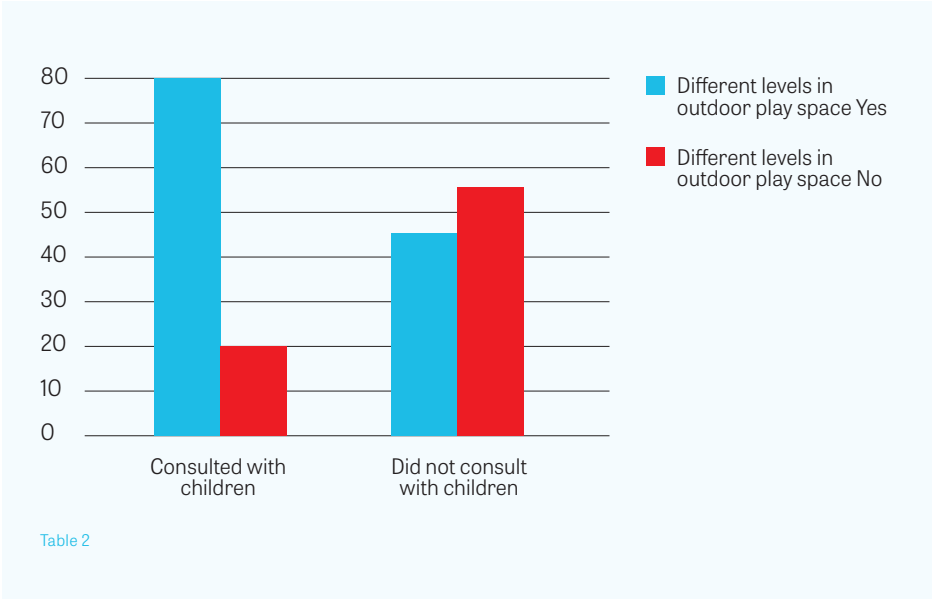


Table 2

Of those centres who reported that they consulted with children on the design of the outdoor play space, eighty percent had different physical levels in their outdoor play space. In the case of centres that did not consult with children, only forty one percent had different levels. In other words most of the outdoor play spaces in centres who did not consult with children, were flat.

There was also a relationship between consulting with children and whether the outdoor space has grass, shrubs and trees and if there was a set time for outdoor play. This analysis indicates that the outdoor play space of the centres who had consulted with children, was more varied. According to Garrick (2009), creating successful outdoor play environments can benefit significantly by involving children in the process. Furthermore, the finding that this group were less likely to have a set time for outdoor play could also suggest that the curriculum was more flexible and child-led.

Conclusion

This study found that ECCE practitioners were alert to the learning opportunities provided by the outdoor play spaces and had a positive attitude to the outdoors generally. It indicated that practitioners have an understanding of their role in supporting learning through playing outdoors. It also showed that they had an awareness of the versatility of outdoor environments in children's learning. Wood (2013) argues that "the role of the practitioner is to see the potential for playful learning" (p.75). Evidence from this study showed that practitioners articulated their role in identifying this potential for playful learning outside.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the study, it indicates that some focus on design of outdoor play spaces in ECCE centres may be warranted. In addition giving children agency and voice in the design of outdoor play spaces may have value.

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On your bike

Outdoor play in Irish 5 year olds

Suzanne Egan and Jennifer Pope

Introduction

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children have the right to play (UNCRC, 1989 Article 31) and the importance of outdoor play has been well-documented (Bento and Dias, 2017). From a physical and psychological perspective, playful opportunities are essential for healthy growth, development and overall well-being (Pellegrini and Smith, 1998). Physical play supports the development of muscle tone, gross and fine motor skills and is an important factor in healthy weight maintenance, as play is exercise. Play is also key for aspects of cognitive, socio-emotional development and well-being such as self-regulation, resilience, nurturing friendships and encouraging creativity, problem-solving and communication (Whitebread, 2010; Zigler, Singer and Bishop-Joseph, 2006). Additionally, play has an impact for children in terms of adapting and co-constructing their environments, identity and operating across adaptive systems (Lester and Russell, 2008). If children are viewed as active agents (Prout, 2005), play gives independence, control, opportunities to challenge and take risks (Tovey, 2011).

Playing outdoors provides opportunities to move more freely, and to explore and engage with natural materials and resources (Fjortoft, 2001). In terms of physical health and well-being, playing outdoors encourages physical development as children are significantly more active outdoors than indoors (Engelen et al., 2015). Fundamental movement skills (such as walking, jumping, climbing, throwing and catching) play an extensive role in promoting gross motor development, coordination and physical dexterity (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2014). Opportunities to develop skills are often linked to increased confidence and proficiency (Piek, Hands and Licari, 2012) and opportunity, variety and practice are key to mastery (NCCA, 2014). Increased exposure to the outdoors may also have a positive impact on the developing immune system (Okada, 2010).

In addition to supporting physical development, outdoor play is also important for socio-emotional and cognitive development. There are many different types of play activities children can engage in outdoors and activities vary in how much social interaction and cooperation is required with other children (e.g., reciprocal role-taking, detection of play signals, turn taking) (e.g., Pellegrini, 1987) and in how cognitively demanding they are (e.g., remembering rules, keeping score, knowing the next step to be completed). For example, Veiga et al. (2017) found a positive association between physical exercise play and social competence (measured during recess in the preschool playground) in preschoolers. However, one recent study examining play in three to five year olds found that children engaged in considerably more technology play (e.g., TV, tablet) and non-technology play (e.g., toys, puzzles, reading) than outdoor play (playground, bike) (Slutsky and DeShetler, 2017).

The neighbourhood environment may also impact on levels of outdoor play. For example, one study found that the neighbourhood environment was associated with children's sedentary behaviour outside school hours, with increased parental satisfaction with nearby public outside spaces negatively associated with time spent viewing television or using electronic devices (Veitch, Timperio, Crawford, Abbott, Giles-Corti and Salmon, 2011). Other research investigating the effect of neighbourhood characteristics on outdoor play in the United States has demonstrated that higher maternal perceptions of neighbourhood collective efficacy (e.g., trust and cohesion) were associated with more hours of outdoor play and more trips to a park or playground (Tolbert Kimbro, Brooks-Gunn and McLanahan, 2011). Therefore, an insight into the extent and type of outdoor play activities of young Irish children, and potential barriers to outdoor play is merited.

Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), a nationally representative longitudinal study of a sample of Irish children and their families, provides a wealth of data on many aspects of their lives

(see <http://www.esri.ie/growing-up-in-ireland/> for more information). The aim of the current research is to draw on the GUI data to provide a snapshot of outdoor play in Irish five year olds, as reported by their parents. The sample of children and families in the GUI study was selected and weighted to be representative of the population on the basis of information from national census data. Given the breadth of topics covered in the GUI study, the questions asked relating to outdoor play are limited. However, the responses from this sample have a high degree of generalizability to the population, which makes these findings informative, particularly as they have not been reported elsewhere.

In addition to reporting a snapshot of outdoor play in young Irish children, we also report figures relating to the neighbourhood environment to examine if this affects outdoor play levels by either encouraging more outdoor play or acting as a barrier to it. An understanding of the extent and types of outdoor play in Irish children, and barriers to it, is important for many reasons such as supporting healthy growth, development and overall well-being in children (Pellegrini and Smith, 1998), informing national and local policies and providing an evidence base for resource related decisions.

Methodology and data

Data were collected on a sample of 9001 children, as part of the GUI study, when they were five years of age principally through parental questionnaires. The findings reported below are derived from the response of the primary caregiver (predominantly the child's mother) to a series of questions relating to play and to the neighbourhood in which the family lives. The primary caregiver was asked to indicate whether or not, or how often their child engages in various types of play and outdoor activities (e.g., climbing trees, playing chasing, riding a bike) and to answer questions about their neighbourhood.

Results

The results indicated there is almost universal access to outdoor play equipment such as a bicycle or roller skates (99.2%). As Table 1 below illustrates most children ride a bike, tricycle or scooter multiple times per week. The most popular daily activity of those measured is playing chasing (64%). Climbing on things such as trees, climbing frames or wall bars is engaged in less frequently than the other forms of outdoor play measured as only 27.1% do this sort of activity daily (with the exception of skating which may be beyond the balance capabilities of most five year olds).

	Never	Less than once per week	1–2 times per week	3–6 times per week	Every day
Skates	83.9	7.3	4.0	2.0	2.7
Climbs on trees, climbing frame, wall bars	12.2	18.8	24.9	16.6	27.1
Plays with a ball	1.5	8.4	21.1	21.7	47.2
Rides a bike, tricycle or scooter	3.1	7.0	17.3	24.0	48.6
Plays chasing	1.0	2.7	10.7	21.1	64.3

Table 1 Percentages of parents reporting how often their child engages in various outdoor activities.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
This is a safe neighbourhood	58.2	37.8	3.1	.8
There are good parks, playgrounds and play spaces	33.6	38.4	19.1	9.0
The state of footpaths, roads and street lighting is good	24.6	45.5	19.9	10.1
There is heavy traffic on my street or road	9.9	20.1	45.8	24.2
It is safe for children to play outside during the day	35.3	48.0	11.9	4.8
Most people in your neighbourhood can be trusted	33.6	58.3	6.8	1.3

Table 2 Percentage of parents agreeing and disagreeing with statements relating to neighbourhood safety and facilities.

	Very common	Fairly common	Not very common	Not at all common
Rubbish and litter lying about	6.0	16.0	43.8	34.2
Homes and gardens in bad condition	1.6	6.8	51.1	40.6
Vandalism and deliberate damage to property	1.8	6.7	41.6	49.8
People being drunk or taking drugs in public	1.9	5.4	30.6	62.2

Table 3: Percentage of parents reporting unsocial behavior in their neighbourhood.

Does activity everyday	Strongly agrees 'It is safe to play outside'	Strongly disagrees 'It is safe to play outside'	Average (as reported in Table 1)
Skates	3.3	1.2	2.7
Climbs on trees, climbing frame, wall bars	31.5	23.1	27.1
Plays with a ball	51.4	41.3	47.2
Rides a bike, tricycle or scooter	55.4	38.7	48.6
Plays chasing	68.3	62.5	64.3

Table 4: Percentage of children engaging in various activities every day (as reported by parents) for parents who 'strongly agree' or 'strongly disagree' that is safe for their children to play outside during the day.

Examining the neighbourhood environment indicated that most parents are satisfied with the neighbourhood in which they live. Only 2.5% of parents reported that their neighbourhood was a poor or very poor place to bring up children, whereas 87.7% reported that their neighbourhood was good or excellent (9.7% reported that it was average). Table 2 above shows that most parents strongly agree/agree that their neighbourhood is safe (96.1%) and that it is safe for children to play outside (83.3%).

However, a substantial minority agree/strongly agree that there is heavy traffic on their road (30%), disagree/strongly disagree that there are good parks, playgrounds or play spaces (28.1%) or that the state of footpaths, roads and lighting is good (30%) and report that litter lying about is fairly/very common (24%) (see also Table 3 above).

A series of chi-square tests were conducted in order to investigate if the safety of the neighbourhood was a factor in how often children engaged in the various forms of outdoor play. We used responses to the statement 'it is safe for children to play outside during the day' as an overall indicator of neighborhood safety and parent's willingness to allow their children play outdoors. We compared these responses with how often they reported their child engaged in the various outdoor activities. The chi square tests examining each of the activities indicated significant associations between how often the activities are engaged in and the parent's rating of the safety statement (See Table 4 above), all $X^2 > 32$, $df = 15$, all $p's < .001$.

Discussion

It is encouraging to note that the majority of parents report that their children engage in some sort of outdoor play everyday, whether it is riding a bike, playing chasing or playing ball. Of note in the reported findings are that daily rates of some outdoor play activities such as climbing trees or using climbing frames (27.1%) are considerably lower than daily rates of other types of outdoor play activities such as chasing (64%) or other types of play in this sample (e.g.

pretend play, 67.8%, as previously reported by Smyth, 2016). Lower rates of this type of activity may be present because of a lack of access to climbing frames or trees suitable for climbing in the neighbourhood, whereas chasing or playing ball involves little or no equipment. Different types of play and games support the development of different physical and psychological skills and therefore parents should encourage a variety of play activities in their young children.

However, how safe the parent thinks it is for their child to play outside impacts on how often the children play outside and an unsafe neighbourhood may be one of the barriers to outdoor play, consistent with previous research (e.g., Toldbert Kimbro, et al., 2011). In their recent obesity campaign evaluation, SafeFood (2017) reported that parents identified playing outside with friends/neighbours as the most successful method to increase the amount of physical activity their child gets. However, bad weather (44%) and spending time on screens (26%) indicated as barriers to promoting physical activity. The findings reported here suggest that the safety of the outdoor environment may also be a factor in the frequency of outdoor activities for Irish children, particularly for the minority of families who report that they live in an unsafe neighbourhood.

One limitation of the findings is that the data collected only measured how many days per week the children engage in the various activities and not how long the children might engage in the activities each day, and future research might address this point. Also, it is important to note that levels of children's play in the GUI data at age five are only based on parental responses, rather than asking the children directly or observing them. It may be the case that the children engage in the activities measured (e.g., climbing trees, bike riding) more or fewer times per week than parents are aware of. However, given the relatively young age of the children, a high level of parental supervision or involvement in these outdoor activities might be expected. While this research gives us a sense of outdoor play at home, as reported by parents, further

research is also needed to explore the extent of outdoor and physical play in early childhood settings and schools, the importance of which is advocated in Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Ireland (NCCA, 2009), Siolta, the National Quality Framework for early childhood education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), 2006) and the Early Years Services Regulations (2016) governing early childhood settings.

One of the national outcomes in 'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: National Policy' framework for children and young people 2013-2020, (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2014) is the active and healthy physical and mental wellbeing of all children. Given the prevalence of obesity in very young children (The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), 2011, 2013; Bel-Serrat S., Heinen M.M., Murrin C.M., Daly L., Mehegan J., Concannon M., Flood C., Farrell D., O'Brien S., Eldin N., and Kelleher C.C., 2017), physical activity and play outdoors needs to be nurtured in the earliest years. Resources are available for parents such as 'Outdoor play matters' by Barnardos (2014) which is designed for parents and care-givers of young children, and highlights the importance of outdoor play experiences.

All children should have opportunity to play outdoors in a safe environment each day. Health extends beyond personal well-being to community well-being (Kaplan and Kaplan, 2005) and social capital (cohesion, social trust and sense of community) can have a direct impact on health-related quality of life for parents and children (Underdown, 2007). Safe and Supportive Chemical, Physical, and Built Environments are highlighted as one of the key foundations of lifelong health (The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard, 2010) and parents and communities need to be supported to promote the health and well-being of young children.

Conclusion

Play is an essential activity for all aspects of children's development. Although the majority of young Irish children engage in outdoor play, neighbourhood safety is a factor, and there is still significant scope to encourage further participation in activities such as outdoor games of chasing and climbing on a daily basis to support development. An understanding of the extent and types of outdoor play engaged in in Ireland by young children, and the barriers to it, should be useful to parents, preschools, schools, and policy makers.

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Experiencing outdoor play in after-school settings in Ireland

Annie Cummins

Introduction

The decrease in children's independent mobility has limited their opportunities for participating in unstructured outdoor free play (O'Keeffe and O'Beirne, 2015; Bergen and Fromberg, 2015; Buckingham, 2011). According to Leverett (2011), childhood spaces have increasingly become domesticated, insularised and institutionalised, which has restricted children's opportunity to occupy space without adult surveillance. Wilson believes that "We should value the chance for our children to be overlooked and observed at the same time, the chance that offers them the possibility to discover things for themselves and to come at the world creatively" (Wilson, 2012:35). Centre-based after-school settings have the potential to provide unstructured outdoor play activities for children in a safe environment. This paper will draw on research carried out as part of my PhD research on children's unstructured play in centre-based after-school settings.

Although widespread throughout mainland Europe, centre-based after-school services are relatively new in the Republic of Ireland (DJELR, 2005). Since the 1990s, there has been an increased demand for non-parental school-age childcare. However, the amount of children attending centre-based after-school settings has remained relatively stable over the last twenty years (Byrne and O'Toole, 2015). Plantenga and Remery (2013) note the lack of attention given to children's own experience in centre-based childcare settings in Ireland. This study wishes to address this lacuna in scholarship by placing children's own perspective at the heart of the methodology.

Methodology

Three centre-based after-schools, which consisted of a total of sixty-nine children between the ages of six and twelve years old, participated in this research. Due to the diversity in age and ability among the participants in the centre-based after-school settings, a mixed method qualitatively driven approach was

taken. As a former special needs assistant and a Montessori teacher, I was able to draw on my experience of working with a diverse range of abilities and on my knowledge of creative pedagogical practices to help formulate a research methodology that would be inclusive of all the participants. The methods used during the empirical data collection included participant observations, focus groups, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, artwork and animations. Using a creative approach ensured multiple opportunities for children's involvement and participation.

Findings

Centre-based after-schools cater for a relatively small number of children on a daily basis. The limited number of play-friends available encouraged children to mix across gender and age categories. In this sense, centre-based after-schools are more akin to neighbourhoods than school playgrounds (Thorne, 1993). Once homework was completed, children were encouraged to engage in unstructured free play. According to Frost et al. (2004), both indoor and outdoor spaces are important for children's play, but outdoor environments provide more opportunities and freedom to be loud and rambunctious. During my observations, the outdoors provided children with the opportunities to play racing games, participate in soccer matches, do gymnastics, play chase and climb trees. Henricks believes that outdoor play promotes gross motor development as "children run, jump, climb, push, pull and otherwise use major muscle groups" (Henricks, 2015: 152). The outdoors provides a wide range of social and material resources for children to engage with, which promotes physical development and social learning (Frost et al., 2004). When outdoors, children had more opportunity to interact with larger groups, move between different playgroups and engage in physical games.

When given the opportunity, children create a special relationship with the outdoors (Frost, 2004; Nabhan and Trimble, 1994; Henricks,

2015; Gill, 2007). Outdoor environments need to be designed in a way that allows children to engage in creative and challenging play activities (Frost, 2004; Brown, 2015). Rasmussen (2004) found that children often relate to and attribute meaning to certain places within their everyday lives, which she calls 'children's places'. The emotional meaning children give to their outdoor space often comes into conflict with safeguarding practices within the centres. Thus, children may not always adhere to and play the way adults intended in centre-based after-school settings.

Risk-taking behaviour is an inevitable part of children's play. Without challenge, players become frustrated and disillusioned and the play itself becomes boring (Goffman, 1961; Caillois, 1961; Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde, 2014). Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde use Piaget's concepts of assimilation and accommodation to explain the balance between skill and challenge. When players become fully immersed in play, the assimilation (skill) and accommodation (challenge) is believed to be in a state of equilibrium. Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (2014) believe that the intrinsic motivation to develop is fuelled by the 'flow experience'. Flow is defined as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great costs, for the sheer sake of doing it" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 4).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) believes that the motivating factor for achieving the flow experience is happiness. However, happiness is not sustainable if the play remains static and therefore, the player needs to bring disequilibrium to their activities in order to continue to enjoy the game. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (2014) point out, "To continue providing optimal experiences, flow activities must constantly be re-created" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde, 2014: 27). Thus, boredom provides a necessary incentive to seek out new and creative challenges that will interrupt the equilibrium and bring about development.

During an observation, one girl (10 years) decided that she was going to jump from the top of the wooden play Ark (approx. 2 meters high) that was situated in the outdoor space of the centre-based after-school. Her risk-taking behaviour soon attracted the attention of the rest of the children playing outside. Some of the children took on the role of reporter and camera crew and gave an up-to-the-minute newsreel of the events as they unfolded. A number of other children acted as the support crew for the jumper and attached ropes that would (in theory) allow her to abseil down the side of the wooden ark. Some of the support crew also placed cushions and pillows on the ground below to help minimise the impact in case of a fall. A group of other children cheered on the jumper chanting 'jump, jump, jump!' and one boy (11 years) demonstrated the jump with ease a number of times. One girl (8 years) became distraught, drew a gravestone in the mud, and wailed (producing real tears) at every mention of the imminent jump. For the duration of this event, the players were fully immersed in the play world – a state of play that Csikszentmihalyi (1971; 1990) refers to a 'Flow'.

Risk-taking or deep play is not about the action, but the state of mind. Children's experiences of risk are heightened if they step into the 'second reality' (Caillois, 1961) and believe that there is danger involved. The real or imagined risk involved in the Ark jump game captured the children's imagination and allowed a second reality to form among the group. Every player accepted the danger involved and incorporated them into their play-world. The "reporters" operated at a distance from the event, viewing the risk-taking play but not engaging in it. These players were akin to spectators at a match: fully immersed in the atmosphere of the moment but not engaging in the sport. The "jumper" added to the intense atmosphere by playing up her own fears and delaying the inevitable event. She encouraged the "helpers" to manufacture safety equipment from old rope and cushions. While making many attempts to climb over the edge of the Ark, the "jumper" discussed how dangerous the jump would be, which fuelled suspense,

fear and excitement among the other players. Some of the other players became part of the cheering squad and encourage the jump, while others allowed the fear to envelop them, which resulted in increased anxiety and tears. Only one child refused to enter the second reality and attempted to shatter the play world by dismissing the risk involved.

Huizinga (1950) makes a distinction between the spoil-sport and the cheat; unlike the cheat, the spoil-sport appears to be part of the play-world, but they shatter the 'magic circle' by illuminating its fragility. By dismissing the risk involved, the spoil-sport attempted to create a second play community that flouted the rules of the original play-world. In this instance, the other players refused to take heed or acknowledge the spoil-sports existence, which inevitably isolated him from the game. Huizinga believed that expulsion from the game was the only solution for spoil-sports as their existence in the play-space "robs play of its illusion" (Huizinga, 1950: 11). In the end, it was not the spoil-sport that dissolved the play-world, but a staff member who became aware of the children's actions and was concerned for their safety.

Conclusion

After-school facilities are environments "created by adults and designated by them as places for children" (Rasmussen, 2004: 155). Within these places for children, space is organised in accordance with the adult's perspective on what "good" play is and how it should be performed. While the space within after-school settings is regulated by adults, these Macro-structures can be reinforced or challenged by micro-actions. The micro-actions relate to "issues of identity, agency and participation, and more commonly the domain of children" (Wood, 2012: 338).

The institutionalisation of children's lives has limited their opportunities to participate in risk-taking activities, particularly in outdoor spaces. Safeguarding practices can restrict children's choice in after-school settings and limit their opportunities to participate in risk-taking

behaviour. Centre-based after-school facilities need to continuously provide new and innovative material in both indoor and outdoor spaces that will facilitate physical play.

The lack of clearly defined guidelines for after-schools does a disservice to the sector. As this research found, children participate in a rich diversity of play forms in centre-based after-schools. Through a play-based programme, centre-based after-schools have the possibility of offering an environment that celebrates unstructured but observed forms of play. Centre-based after-schools should not be regarded as a service or a solution to a social problem, but as a play space where children can freely interact with one another under the supervision of trained professionals. Children are citizens in their own right and as such should be entitled to spaces where they can interact with their peers (Moss and Petrie, 2002). Unfortunately, without a clear sense of identity, these settings will continue to deliver an ad hoc service.

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Research Summaries



Forest Schools Bringing Visual Arts Outdoors

Claire Murphy

This research is under review for publication, pending minor revisions in *The Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*.

Forest Schools is a concept, or intervention to traditional educational settings, backed up by research and built upon long-standing theories that children engage with nature naturally and that learning becomes more relevant to the student when they can relate it to real life scenarios that theorists such as Steiner, Montessori, Waldorf and Reggio Emilia described. Educators wishing to become Forest School Leaders must complete a level three qualification (UK). This includes obtaining an outdoor first-aid certificate. Trainee Forest School Leaders conduct a six-week block of practice and must submit a portfolio of work that is approved by an accrediting body.

Forest School (FS) is based on six principles:

- 1 FS is a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than a one-off or infrequent visits; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review links each session.
- 2 FS takes place in a woodland or natural environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.
- 3 FS uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for being, development and learning.
- 4 FS aims to promote the holistic development

of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.

- 5 FS offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.
- 6 FS is run by qualified Forest School practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice. (ForestSchoolAssociation.org, 2018).

Forest School is a process that builds on an individual's innate motivation and positive attitude to learning, offering them the opportunities to take risks, make choices and initiate learning for themselves. 'Nature may inspire different kinds of creativity and different art than the built environment' (Louv, 2005, p. 97). During Forest Schools, children engage in activities such as building shelters, cooking on campfires and identifying plants and wildlife. The focus of the scheme is on the whole child and their experiences, therefore developing the child's independence and self-esteem through their engagement with the natural environment (Murray and O'Brien, 2005).

Maynard describes the possible tensions between the Forest School leader and the class teacher and the possibility of a contrast of two educational goals. 'With a movement [Forest School] that has spread so far and so fast with little written material to support it, there is a clear danger that the original idea will be lost through lack of understanding' (Knight, 2013, p.13).



Fig. 1 Land Art



Fig. 2 Bird Feeders

The question for the research was 'To what extent can the Irish Primary School Curriculum Visual Arts Construction Strand Objectives be achieved through the Forest School Framework?'

The sub questions explored were:

- What outcomes were observed from implementing the framework? Pedagogy or otherwise (social/emotional).
- Were the 'Construction' Curricular Objectives met?
- To what extend were the children engaged in the learning process?

The main methodology was Action Research, as described by McNiff (2009). This methodology was appropriate as I wished to improve my teaching of the 'Construction' strand. It was a qualitative inquiry that featured multiple viewpoints to create a triangulation of data. Data was collected through video, photographs, journals, informal interviews and observations. Data collection was systematic, and clarification of research bias and critical reflection is evident through the teacher journal and discussion, stated in the research paper, as highlighted in Sullivan et al. (2016). Kemmis (2009) notes that this process is one of self-transformation, in which the researcher remakes the practice for themselves

The children explored and experimented with the properties and characteristics of making structures in accordance with the Irish Primary School Visual Arts Curriculum 'Construction' curricular objectives. They discovered how some materials help create or suggest form and how structure and balance are created. Different parts of structures were used to create a whole structure and materials were joined together. The children constructed imaginative structures from natural and reused objects. They also responded to each other's work.

'Pre-academic' or social/emotional skills were also recorded through the thematic analysis of the written, visual, spoken and observed data. These skills were evident in the areas of resilience, responsibility, independence, happiness in achievement and in the child's awareness of the surroundings. The details of these findings are explored in the research paper submitted to The Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, which is currently pending minor revisions.

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Fig. 3 Whittling with Food Peelers

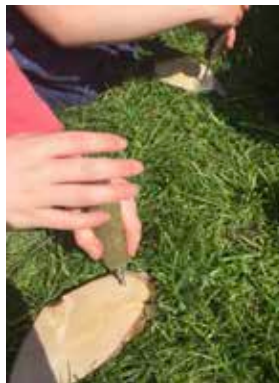


Fig. 4 Wooden Discs

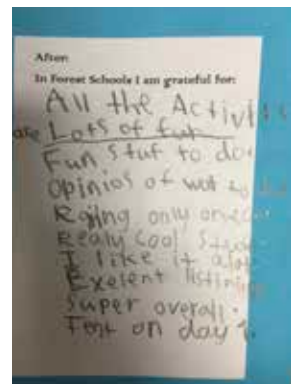


Fig. 5 Student Self Reflection

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Participation in Play and Children's Well-Being

Alice Moore and Helen Lynch

Introduction

There is an ever-increasing call for research that extends beyond the study of children's disorders, deficits, and disabilities, and as such, the study of well-being is a significant up-and-coming frontier in research regarding child development (Pollard and Lee, 2003). In spite of this, there remains a lack of knowledge on what positive well-being for children actually looks like (Fattore, Mason, and Watson, 2007). From an occupational science perspective, well-being is closely linked to participation in occupation (Hocking, 2009) and is conceptualised as a synthesis of doing, being, becoming and belonging (Wilcock and Hocking, 2015). Given that participation in occupation is a significant predictor of well-being, it seems plausible to argue that participation in play is imperative for child well-being, since play is a significant childhood occupation in most contexts globally (Roopnarine, 2011). However, play is neither included as an indicator nor as a domain in the national set of child well-being indicators in Ireland (Barron, 2013). Thus, establishing the role of play as a contributing factor to children's well-being is of utmost importance. This paper will present a brief synopsis of a research study that aimed to explore children's conceptualisation of play and happiness (as a proxy measure of well-being) in Ireland in 2015. This paper was published in a peer reviewed journal (*Journal of Occupational Science*) in September 2017 and can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2017.1377105>.

Methodology

A focused ethnographic approach was used to explore children's conceptualisations of happiness amongst children living in Ireland. The study employed a mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001); combining visual, spatial, and language-based methods. Twenty-three participants aged between 6 and 8 years were recruited through contact with three local primary schools in the southern region of Ireland. The participants' accounts were gathered and collaborative thematic analysis

(Carpenter and Suto, 2008) was conducted to form the basis of the findings.

Findings and discussion

Findings identified the centrality of play, place and people as contributing to children's happiness. Children named multiple occupations as play (e.g. doing maths, reading, baking) which they identified as contributing to their happiness, when they were experienced as fun. Play locations identified as important to study children, included private and public places at home, in school and in the community: natural and built environments. Thus, an expanded view of play emerges as a subjective aspect of childhood that is intrinsically connected to well-being and happiness. This, in turn, challenges adult assumptions on what is considered play or not play. This study illustrates specific perspectives that children have on this topic of well-being and argues for the rationale to include play when considering subjective well-being. While many of the categories identified may have been anticipated from examining works of previous authors (e.g. well-being is about participation in occupation), the centrality of children's participation in occupation, in particular play, across all domains is highly significant. This finding illustrates the extent to which children perceive their participation in play to positively influence their overall sense of happiness and well-being.

Conclusion

The findings have potential application in a variety of settings (for example early childhood research; early childhood education and curriculum development; health promotion efforts). They also point to appropriate issues that should be addressed, both at policy and political level. While the importance of relationships cannot be overlooked; family support and infrastructural supports, for both schools and community development in its broadest sense, are also necessary if we are to maximise opportunities for play and well-

being among children living in Ireland. Unless play is valued and prioritised as contributing to children's well-being, it will continue to be seen as a frivolous occupation, replaced by more measurable alternatives.

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