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THE INFLUENCES OF OPPORTUNITY. DIFFERENCES IN CHILDREN'S PLAY CHOICES ACROSS DIVERSE COMMUNITIES IN IRELAND

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from The Irish Neighbourhood Play Project; a research study initiated by IT Sligo and Early Childhood Ireland in 2012. The focus of this paper is on the data section which highlights children's play choices and opportunities across socio-economic communities. The study incorporated almost 1800 families across 240 communities. Data was collected within disadvantaged communities, middle class communities and affluent communities. Where and what children are playing was investigated. The choices children and families make within play have a direct effect on the developing brain of the young child (Acar & Torquati, 2015). This, in turn, affects school performance and engagement. Choices however, are often framed by opportunities; opportunities are framed by government policy and investment in community facilities as well as socio-cultural norms. The data from this project shows that children across socio-economic divides are engaging in dramatically different play, experiences and activities. Key differences also emerged in relation to how children in diverse communities are engaging with technology. The differences across multiple themes are startling and offer insights into the breadth of childhood experience across the Island of Ireland.

Keywords: The Irish Neighbourhood Play Study, Play, Early Childhood Education, Socio-economic differences, disadvantage, affluence, opportunity.

1 THE PROJECT

1.1 The Irish Neighbourhood Play Study

The Irish Neighbourhood Play Research Project was a large scale research study which included almost 1700 participant families and 240 communities throughout Ireland. The research study was initiated, shaped and resourced by IT Sligo and Early Childhood Ireland to investigate the play choices made by children aged 0-15 years of age. It used parental surveys and naturalistic observation to secure data on how children in modern Ireland aged 0-15 are spending their free time. An all-island approach was taken incorporating cities, towns and rural areas across a variety of socio-economic groupings.

Responses from 1688 families were collated. There was a wide spread of respondents from 18 geographic areas. There was also an even representation from the three socio economic (SE) indicators; affluent (30.5%), middle (35.4%) and disadvantaged (33.9%). 60% of respondents were from suburban houses surrounding large cities, medium sized towns and villages, 21% were from rural houses, 18% were from urban houses and 1% were from urban apartments.

Responses gathered were based on 906 boys and 782 girls between the years of 0 and 15

Despite the socio-economic spread of communities incorporated, the majority of respondents (61%) identified themselves as middle income earners, while 13% of respondents were unemployed. Just under half of all respondents (49%) had achieved a third level qualification above level 7 (Bachelor's Degree).

Over two thirds of parents who took part in this study were aged between 35 and 49, a further quarter were aged between 25 and 34.

1.2 Methodology

The aim of the research was centred on the research question: What is happening in children's neighbourhood play in Ireland today?

Focusing on the best methods with which to answer this question, a blended approach was adopted that incorporated detailed parental questionnaires (phase one) and the construction of a tailored observational tool (phase two). Naturalistic observation (Geller, Russ & Altomari, 1986; Loucopoulos & Karakostas, 1995) was chosen as the most effective approach of capturing a snapshot view of neighbourhood play. The project's sequential design allowed for the collection of data from multiple sources to facilitate triangulation which enriched the project, as there are often differences between what people report and actual behaviour (Punch, 2001).

1688 families took part across 240 communities. The 240 communities were spread across 18 geographical regions which incorporated 6 cities, six medium size towns and 6 rural areas. Socio economic difference, rural/urban differences, cross-border jurisdiction differences, age, gender and type of dwelling differences were all part of the analysis.

This was a descriptive study designed to uncover children's play patterns in modern Ireland. A large scale quantitative study was carried out, incorporating personal survey research and structured observation. The study sought to uncover the extent to which children play outside, the types of play they are predominantly engaged in, the places children play, the impact of homework on play and the impact of the physical environment has on play. Data collection comprised two phases; phase one was a large personal scale survey with 1688 parents and phase two was structured observation of 240 children at play. Data was collected during the months of June and July 2012.

The unique benefits of personal survey research such as high response rates and control over the sample (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p. 262) ensured that data was collected in a comprehensive and methodical manner. Data was captured in the respondent's home through the use of a structured questionnaire. It was felt that collecting data in this location would help the respondent feel at ease and facilitate a longer questionnaire instrument (Robson, 2011, p. 245). The questionnaire comprised 22 questions in total, the majority of which were closed ended finishing with a small number of open-ended questions. The questionnaire instrument was refined and tested for validity and reliability during the pre-test and questions that were somewhat duplicated and/or ambiguous were revised (Robson, 2011, p. 265). The final questionnaire took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The population of interest were all parents of children aged between 0 and 15 who resided on the island of Ireland in June- July 2012. The sampling technique utilised was non-probability sampling, which is appropriate when access to a comprehensive sampling frame does not exist. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling (Robson, 2011, p. 75); 18 regions across the island of Ireland were selected to maximise representation across geographical regions and socio economic regions. For Southern Ireland, the Haase-Pratschke Index of Relative Affluence and Deprivation (revised from Central Statistics Office, 2012) was employed, alongside the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2010) to inform selection of target locations. The final sample size achieved was 1688. The Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) Data was used to analyse data. Analysis was uni-variate and bi-variate in nature, counting patterns and frequencies, and exploring relationships between variables (see Pallant, 2010).

The second quantitative data collection methods employed was naturalistic observation (Geller, Russ and Altomari, 1986; Loucopoulos and Karakostas, 1995), which is commonly used to capture data on the behaviours of children. Observation was overt and non-participant in nature, and occurred in playgrounds and communal play spaces. While participant observation has its merits when researching children, children may feel uncomfortable communicating with unfamiliar adults (Punch, 2002), therefore it was decided to employ non-participant observation, as adults are unable to truly participate in children's social worlds (Hill, 1997; Fine and Sandstrom, 1988). Data collection was guided by 'The Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children' policy (Department of Social Protection, 2011), The Convention on Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2010) and the Data Protection Act (Government of Ireland, 2003). Observations were short term in nature, approximately three minutes, which facilitated a focused data collection of children's play in the context of behaviours and the surrounding environment.

Data was collected utilising a simple coding system (Robson, 2012, pp. 337) which captured data on variables including age, gender, extent of peer interaction, type of play environment, play objects used, instances of interaction with nature and/or electronics and the type of play children were engaged in. The population of interest was all children aged between 0 and 15 who resided on the

island of Ireland in June- July 2012. Corresponding with the survey research, the sampling technique employed was purposive sampling, external play areas within the previously determined geographical and socio economic locations were observed. The final sample size achieved was 240. Data was analysed quantitatively; frequencies and cross tabulations were performed.

Due to the size of the data set, the scope of this paper concentrates on the presentation of findings rather than discussion. The discussion of the findings will be shaped by discussion at the conference and a further publication that develops these themes will follow.

2 THE FINDINGS

2.1 The Impact of type of house on play

The study found that all children who play outside 'rarely' come from urban apartments. While this was a small number of families (16), it is nevertheless indicative of an area requiring further study and holds many implications for town planning and urban recreation space considerations.

A rural/urban divide also emerged in relation to mixed gender friendships. Children living in rural homes (82%) have notably more mixed gender relationships than those living in suburban homes (60%).

Opinions are divided on whether family living arrangements impact their child's opportunity to play; 39% feel their living arrangements impact their child's opportunity to play while 38% feel their living arrangements do not at all impact their child's opportunity to play. Further analysis indicates that the SE indicator does not appear to influence these opinions. However analysis on type of dwelling highlights one major difference; all of those who live in urban apartments feel their living arrangements impact their child's opportunity to play. Given the availability of wild nature spaces within rural communities, this is perhaps unsurprising. However, with increasing evidence mounting regarding the benefits of play within nature and particularly within wild spaces (Acar & Torquati, 2015), this is another area which holds implications for planning authorities.

2.2 Analysis of instances of 'No play'

There were 65 recorded observations (27% of the total study) where no play was taking place. Weather conditions were recorded for 62. Almost two thirds of 'no play' observations were recorded in dry weather and just under one third in wet weather. Weather as a reason for empty play spaces is therefore discounted as a major contributor.

Instances of 'no play' did not differ between the weekdays and weekends as 51% of recorded instances of 'no play' were on weekdays and 49% were on weekends.

Almost a half of 'no play observations' were in medium sized town areas (47%), 31% were in rural areas and 22% were in city areas. Over two fifths (43%) were in affluent areas, 32% were in middle areas while 25% were observed in disadvantaged areas.

Analysis of no play instances indicates that play facilities within urban areas and disadvantaged areas are attracting more children. Further study on whether this is due to the quality of design, the play perspectives of the families or population demographics is warranted.

2.3 Socio-Economic differences in where children play

The top three places children play in are the garden (66%), all over the house (49%) and on the road (41%). Analysis was conducted on the impact of SE area on the places of play. The findings indicate that the SE area does not greatly impact the reported instances of play outdoors in the garden (affluent areas (31%), middle areas (36%) and disadvantaged areas (33%)) and only minor differences exist for playing all over the house and playing outdoors on 'our' road. Of those children who play all over the house, two fifths are from disadvantaged SE areas, just under one third (32%) are from middle SE areas and a quarter (25%) are from affluent SE areas. Of those who play outdoors on 'our' road, nearly two fifths, 38% are from middle SE areas, 34% are from disadvantaged SE areas and the remainder (28%) are from affluent SE areas.

22.4% (378) children play in their own playroom, of which, the majority (56%) are from affluent SE areas, 37% are from middle SE areas while a low number, just under 7% (26) are from disadvantaged SE areas.

The social and emotional implications of playing within and around other family members versus in a dedicated play space warrant investigation. It is also worth considering the privacy benefits for children who do have the opportunity to be unseen within their home based play. Any such benefit would naturally hinge upon the playroom being optional rather than the only choice for indoor play within such homes.

2.4 Play outdoors in wild areas: variances within technological and nature engagements

Parents reported that just under two fifths of children (318) play outdoors in wild areas. Of those who play outside in wild areas, more children (nearly half) are from rural houses. Furthermore, observation revealed that socio-economic differences were evident in relation to nature play in general, with more interactions with nature coming from children in disadvantaged areas and from cities and rural areas as opposed to towns.

Of the 25 observations of nature play, over half (15) were within disadvantaged areas, almost one third (7) were within middle income/class areas, the remainder (3) occurred in affluent areas. Nature play observations were much more common in larger cities or rural areas than they were in medium sized towns. (Note one recording did not specify area). These findings echo the prevalence of play absences within medium sized towns as presented in section 2.2.

Overall there were less observations (14) of children interacting with electronics in outdoor play. More outdoor play observations that incorporated technology were observed in urban areas; 7 in towns and 4 in the city areas, the remaining 3 instances were observed in rural areas. It is interesting to note the higher level of technological engagement in the town was found alongside lower levels of engagement with nature.

2.5 Play outside regardless of the weather

Respondents were asked a series of questions about playing outside. 88% of respondents feel their children play less outside in winter. 26% said their children play outside in bad weather and 15% said their children play outside on dark evenings.

Of the 26% of children (438) who play outside often in challenging weather, the majority of are from suburban houses. However, despite this, there is a higher incidence of children from rural houses playing outside in bad weather. Children in urban families play outside within challenging weather least.

2.6 Play outside on dark evenings

15% of respondents (251) said their children play outside on dark winter evenings. It is worth noting that notably more children from disadvantaged areas play outside often on dark winter evenings (40.2%) with middle class children playing outside in the dark least (29.1%)

Slightly more boys than girls (55%) play outside on dark winter evenings and there is a steady increase in the number of boys playing outside on dark winter evenings from the age of 6 onward. Of the 112 girls who play outside on dark winter evenings more are aged 12 and over.

2.7 Outside play and the type of dwelling

Further analysis of frequency of play outside and the house type (type of dwelling) children live in revealed that house type does not appear to impact the frequency of play outside with one exception; more of those who rarely play outside come from urban apartments. However, it is worth noting that this is a very small number as 1% of the total sample was from urban apartments. However, 16 out of 16 urban families reported the same dearth of outdoor play. As such, this is concerning and warrants further study.

2.8 Differences in gender relationships across communities

66% of parents said their children have opposite gender friendships. More parents from rural houses (82%) reported that their children engage in opposite gender friendships while it was reported that slightly fewer children from suburban houses (60%) engage in opposite gender relationships.

There were 50 recorded observations of gender interaction (just under 29% of 175 observations). Interestingly observational analysis suggested that slightly more gender interaction was observed in cities, as 42% of observations of gender interaction were in city areas, a further 32% were in rural areas and the remaining 26% were in town areas. Furthermore two fifths (42%) were observed in middle socio economic areas, almost one third (30%) in disadvantaged areas and the remainder (28%) in affluent areas.

2.9 Differences in perspectives on homework and play

339 parents, or 20% of respondents feel that homework has a detrimental impact on play. More parents from middle SE areas feel this is the case. Disadvantaged families feel this least.

Agreement amongst parents of girls appears to increase as the age of the girl increases. Whereas there was a more even spread of agreement amongst parents of boys, with agreement peaking at the age of 10.

2.10 Impact of the physical home environment on the opportunity to play

Data on the type of dwelling was gathered for 1661 respondents. Parents were fairly evenly split on whether their dwelling affected their children's play choices, with 47% feeling that it had a noticeable impact and 53% feeling that such impact was negligible or non-existent.

Further analysis indicates that there are no real differences in perceptions of the impact living arrangements have on play across the three socio economic areas. However, as previously highlighted, all of those (1% of the total sample or 16 families) who live in urban apartments feel their living arrangements impact their child's opportunity to play. Attitudes are more evenly spread across the other dwelling types.

2.11 Walking to school

The findings indicate that there are less people walking their child to school now than there was a generation ago. 82% of parents walked to school as a child, while 38% now walk their child to school. No relationship appears to exist between parents walking to school when they were younger and them now walking their child to school.

More parents from Dublin, Limerick, Sligo and Wexford walk their children to school. Fewer parents from Waterford, Tralee, Longford, Castlebar, Enniskillen, Bunbeg, Tuamgraney, Emyvale, Glen of the Downs and Crossgar walk their children to school. While there is a relatively even split between those who walk and those who don't walk their children to school in Galway, Cork, Belfast and Leitrim village. A study looking at what influences parental decision making on this would be worthwhile.

A cross border analysis on walking to school was also carried out. While 38% of parents across all communities walk their child to school, more children from ROI than from NI walk to school (44% and 27% respectively).

2.12 Playing traditional games

738 parents (43%) said their children play traditional games they recognise from their childhood indicating a cultural and heritage dimension to play. Gender and age analysis indicates that slightly more boys (52.5%) than girls play traditional games however from the age of 9 onward there is a notable decrease in the number of boys playing traditional games, while there is a much more gradual decrease in the number of girls playing traditional games from the age of 8 onwards.

The type of house a child lives in does not appear to greatly influence the incidents of playing traditional games, as for the most part only minor differences were evident. It is worth noting however, that in the case of urban apartments, no parent said their child plays traditional games they recognise from their own childhood: a finding that is not replicated in any other community within the study. Families in urban houses (in contrast to those in urban apartments) cited high levels of traditional play among their children.

2.13 Cross-border analysis

The study found that children from Northern Ireland (NI) play outside for longer than children from the Republic of Ireland (ROI) on both weekdays and weekends.

Children in NI are also playing outside for longer than their ROI counterparts. Overall, at weekends 75% of all children within the families studied, play outside for between 2 and 4 hours. Cross border analysis indicates that more children from NI play outside for longer. 27.5% of children from ROI play outside for up to 2 hours while the figure from NI is 6.6%, whereas the number of children from NI who play outside for 3-6 hours is greater (62.6%) than the number of children from ROI who play outside for 3-6 hours (40%).

Cross border analysis also shows a difference in attitudes towards the importance of safety in play. More parents from NI agree that 'safety is of paramount importance when playing'. Given the conflictual history of NI, this is perhaps understandable. Further study on levels of engagement with risk is warranted, especially in light of contemporary research on the benefits of risk taking within play (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012).

Cross border analysis also highlights a difference in the number of children walking to school. More children from ROI walk to school. This is potentially related to the greater safety concerns communicated by Parents within NI.

3 DISCUSSION

This study suggests that socio economic characteristics divide some attitudes towards, and instances of, play and how children in diverse communities are engaging with play spaces, technology and nature differently. Survey analysis suggests there are no differences in perceptions of the impact living arrangements have on play across the three SE areas. Furthermore the findings indicate that the SE area does not greatly impact the top three areas children mostly play in (outdoors in the garden, all over the house and playing outdoors on 'our' road). However the observational dimension of the study unearthed some interesting differences across the SE areas. The least amount of 'no play' observations were recorded in disadvantaged areas, furthermore a greater number of interactions with nature were recorded from children playing in disadvantaged areas and from cities and rural areas as opposed to towns. Parents from urban apartments reported different opinions to other groups; they reported that their children rarely played outside and felt that their living arrangements impact their child's opportunity to play. Furthermore no parent in this group said their child plays traditional games they recognise from their own childhood: a finding that is not replicated in any other community within the study. Interestingly most observations of 'no play' were observed in towns and nature play observations were not as common in medium sized towns. When viewed through the lens of the SE impact on the nature of play, this research uncovers a need for further study on whether affluent children and children living in towns are playing less in their community due to scheduled activities, indoor or technological attractions or alternative reasons.

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