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IS PLAY DISAPPEARING? INSTANCES OF NO-PLAY IN CHILDREN'S NEIGHBOURHOODS: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING, DEVELOPMENT AND CURRICULUM

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Abstract

This paper presents data from the Irish Neighbourhood Play Study that explored children's engagement in play. The data raises concerns around recorded instances of *no-play* in play environments. The instances of *no-play* were recorded during peak play time periods including weekend and afterschool hours. This data raises the critical question: Are today's children being afforded sufficient time to play? Both the quality of opportunity to play and the quantity of time afforded to children to engage in play are important factors in children's learning and development (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer & Berk, 2011; Whitebread, 2012). The data from the Irish Neighbourhood Play Study indicates that children may not be spending enough time playing in their neighbourhoods. In discussing the data, this paper evolves to explore the thesis that schools should attend to this absence of play by providing play-based education. A justification for play-based approaches within the school experience is underpinned by an evidence-based defense of the centrality of play within children's academic and holistic development.

Keywords: The Irish Neighbourhood Play Study, Play, Early Childhood Education, Play, Play Curriculum, Play-based Learning.

1 INTRODUCING THE IRISH NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAY STUDY

The Irish Neighbourhood Play Study was a large scale research project which included almost 1700 participant families across 240 communities throughout Ireland. The research study was initiated, shaped and resourced by The Institute of Technology, Sligo and Early Childhood Ireland to investigate the play choices made by children aged 0-15 years of age. The research team used parental surveys and naturalistic observation to secure data on how children in modern Ireland aged 0-15 are playing in their neighbourhood. An all-island approach was taken incorporating cities, towns and rural areas across a variety of socio-economic groupings. While the study involved both quantitative and qualitative data collection, the findings of this paper arise from a series of 240 quantitative observations of neighbourhood play spaces throughout rural and urban Ireland.

2 METHODOLOGY

This was a descriptive study designed to uncover children's play patterns in modern Ireland. A large scale quantitative observation study was carried out. 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 influence of external factors such as socio economic grouping, rural/urban location, organised sports and homework on play and the impact of the physical environment on children's play choices. The observational data was collected during the months of June and 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.

Naturalistic observation (Geller, Russ & Altomari, 1986; Loucopoulos & Karakostas, 1995), was carried out to gather data on the behaviours of children at play. 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 (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988; Hill, 1997). 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). Research Ethical Approval was granted through The Institute of Technology, Sligo. 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.

3 FINDINGS

This paper presents a small, unexpected and potentially deeply concerning finding from The Irish Neighbourhood Study. Of the 240 scheduled observations, an alarming 65 recorded observations (27% of the total study) showed that 'no play' was taking place within family focused neighbourhoods during peak play-times, inclusive of weekday mornings, afternoons, after school times and on weekends. Weather conditions were recorded for 62 of the 65 observations. Almost two thirds of 'no play' observations were recorded in dry weather and just under one third in wet weather. 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 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. These figures suggested that children were playing outside more within disadvantaged areas and least within affluent areas.

In addition to this socio-economic difference in play absence, there were also significant regional differences noted with almost half (47%) occurring in medium sized towns, 31% in rural areas and 22% in cities. This would suggest that play facilities are an issue. Cities, generally well-resourced with facilities have the lowest level of no-play recordings. The rural areas are endowed with nature's playground comes in slightly higher. However, it is the towns, which have neither the built resources and play spaces of a city, nor the natural field and forest attractions of rural areas, that come in at the highest level of no instances, significantly higher in fact.

4 DISCUSSION

Almost all children play. Childhood play is a universal phenomenon found across time and in all cultures. We are born with a deep evolutionary drive to play and the drive to play is so intense that children will play with just about anything and will do so when they have no real toys, when parents do not actively encourage it, and even in the middle of war zones (White, 2012). Play is an essential and critical part of all children's development. Play starts in the child's infancy and continues throughout life. It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact with the world around them. Play allows children to: create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles (Hurwitz, 2003; Tsao, 2002), and trying things out in a pretend world that would be too risky or impossible to try in the real world (Gray, 2013). It is the process in which children learn about their world and their place in it as they navigate different contexts, environments and situations. Play connects children with their imagination, their environment, their family and the world and it is

intensely enjoyable for them. In the eyes of a young child, play is fun. However, researchers and educators know that play is a complex activity that has many benefits beyond the pure joy it gives children – these playful activities benefit the development of the whole child across physical, cognitive, language, spiritual and social/emotional domains (White, 2012). Play underpins all development and learning for young children, and as such, is of pivotal importance. Equally, its absence as recorded during the Irish Neighbourhood Play Study, is of concern.

There is a shared consensus between psychologists, play scholars and educators worldwide that play has a positive effect on children's overall development and learning. Multiple professions lay evidence based claims about the importance of children's play (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Play is essential for cognitive development and intelligence building. It is essential for social competence, emotional well-being, physical health, growth and learning (p.2). How critical is it then, if it is endangered?

There are many theoretical explanations of play, regardless of their orientation all theorists concur that play occupies a central role in children's lives. Theorists also suggest that the absence of play is an obstacle to the development of healthy and creative individuals (Fleer, 2013; Goldstein, 2012; Moyles, 2012). The common factor that these theorists believe in, is that play is essential for the development of a healthy child - socially, emotionally and academically. In fact, play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognised by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a fundamental right of every child (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) and learning through play is accepted by education experts as one of the most important ways that children learn and develop.

A child is born with over a 100 billion nerve cells or neurons. However, brain development hinges on a complex interaction between the genes a child is born with (nature) and the experiences he or she has in the earliest stages of life (nurture). Input from the environment and early experiences allow neurons to make connections and determine the development of neural circuits, known as synapses. Neurons that are stimulated continue to establish new synapses, forming increasingly elaborate systems of communication that support more complex abilities. Connections that are used repeatedly often become permanent while those that have little stimulation will not develop. This process is called synaptic pruning (Berk, 2008). This makes early stimulation (through language and play) and warm, responsive caregiving critical. Providing playful perceptual, motor and language experiences increases the number of synaptic connections while positive attachments literally protect the brain from stress. For example, when children engage in playful behaviour that the brain identifies as pleasurable a number of regions in the brain are activated (Nagel, 2014, p. 189) and this leads to the release of some very powerful chemicals (dopamine, endorphins and serotonin) that not only contribute to repetitive behaviours but also facilitate learning at a synaptic level (Aamodt & Wang, 2011, cited in Nagel, 2104). Play is reinforced within neural networks through the stimulation of these biochemicals which associate play with social connectivity, feelings of wellbeing, and a sense of accomplishment (Cozolino, 2013, p. 171-172). For example, from the early months of life, a game of peek-a-boo brings joy to both children and adults by stimulating the biochemistry of attachment, pleasure, well-being and reward (Cozolino, 2013, p. 171). When this playful behaviour is repeated the synaptic connections are strengthened, facilitating greater neural connectivity (Nagel, 2014). In this way, play influences neurological development and determines how intricate neural circuits are wired.

The past decade of neuroscientific research suggests that experiences in childhood have a major influence on the neuroarchitecture of the brain, and establishes the trajectory for long term cognitive, social-emotional and health outcomes (Catron & Allen, 2008; Cozolino, 2013; Nagel, 2012; Oberklaid, 2007). The time between birth and eight years is a critical period for brain development. According to Nash (1997) as well as Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) the availability of play experiences and activities at this age affects not only development but also the size of the brain. Brains develop best when children experience loving relationships and opportunities to play. The consequences if either of these is compromised is of critical concern to all that are interested in human development. It is certainly critical to the field of education. Play is by its very position as an indispensable path for development and learning, a key component of our evolving humanity. Research demonstrates that play is the way humans develop efficient brains as it is a scaffold for development, a vehicle for increasing neural structures, and a means by which children practice skills they will need later in life (Else, 2014; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002).

5 CONCLUSION

When children are immersed in meaningful contexts and are provided with opportunities for choice during their day, learning happens (Singer, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006) and it is play that provides this context. It is play that provides the medium through which children explore and develop their identity, their sense of well-being, their relationships and their potential to grow and contribute (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009, p.6). Singer, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2006) further suggest that a deficit of play has implications for the development, not only of the individual child, but of the whole of humanity (p.260).

One of the greatest challenges to children's right to play is the recognition of the value of play in children's lives. Similarly, an acknowledgment that play belongs in the life of the child, whether they be at home, in a centre or at a school, must be reflected in national policy if it is to influence practice at a practical level. If we do not achieve this, the consequences are predictable; parents shall make non-play based choices and prioritise scheduled activities in place of play; educators shall formalise learning earlier in children's educational journeys; policy makers will further fail to protect play within social and educational policy; urban and rural planners shall fail to provide for it within our neighbourhoods.

Alarmingly, the evidence that play is disappearing not only from our neighbourhoods but from early childhood education is mounting (Nicolopoulou, 2010). No reason for concern though...after all, what value is there in play?

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