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PLAYING FOR HIGH STAKES: FINDINGS FROM THE IRISH NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAY RESEARCH PROJECT AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

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Abstract

The Irish Neighbourhood Play Research Project included almost 1700 families and 240 communities throughout Ireland. The findings hold clear implications for educational policy and practice. Using surveys, interviews and naturalistic observation, data was secured on how children in modern Ireland aged 0-15 are playing. An all-island approach was taken incorporating cities, towns and rural areas across a variety of socio-economic groupings.

Interesting findings arose from the data relating to generational differences in levels of freedom, play, exercise, engagement with risk, with nature, with scheduled/timetabled extracurricular activities, with homework, with electronics, with creative activities and with traditional play types and games.

Differences in play choices and experiences were also evident across socio-economic groupings, community types, gender lines, age ranges and housing types.

This paper presents the data and asks what it means within a framework of educational implication. Most importantly: what can education do to redress these

implications? Innovations in pedagogy and policy are required to meet the educational challenges implicit within this data. This ground breaking research on the changing face of childhood points clearly to the need for collaborative, co-participative, democratic, empowering and playful pedagogies and educational policies which support them.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Primary School, Play, Generational Changes, Educational Implications, Childhood, Teachers, Educational Policy, New Pedagogies.

1 BACKGROUND TO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAY PROJECT

The motivation for this research project was anecdotal evidence relating to the decline of free play opportunities in the modern Irish childhood. This much discussed but undocumented and unconfirmed decline is potentially happening across childhood spaces—on the street, in the community, within homes, families, pre-school settings and primary schools. The concern is that, as a society, we are now so focused on structured activities that free play is on a serious trajectory of decline. Play, whereby children are free to self-initiate and develop within their own structures and rules, is a crucial context for learning. Literature articulates that play, in its true sense, is freely chosen, process rather than product orientated and is controlled by the players (Kearns, 2013). Whilst this may be achievable within structured learning environments such as crèches and schools, neighbourhood play embodies both freedom and choice, and is thus a potentially powerful educational tool in a totally child managed space. Free play is both an important learning medium throughout

childhood and a vehicle for building high calibre life skills that can contribute greatly to both the well being of future society and economic productivity. Play is the principle vehicle for all childhood learning—it provides for all domains of the human person: the emotional, social, moral, spiritual, cognitive, physical and the creative (Kearns, 2013). The more uninhibited the play, the greater the engagement of the will of the child. Its decline has serious implications for the development of individual children and ultimately for the future society they will form as adults. Key skills developed through free play include creativity, inventiveness, decisiveness, social competence and natural leadership abilities. Neighbourhood play is imperative in the development of this skillset.

Within crèches and schools, children are under adult observation and operate within formal learning structures. Whilst opportunities to engage in play are provided, these experiences are directed by the educator and remove key elements of the play experience, such as freedom, choice and intrinsic motivation (Fleer, 2013). At weekends, many children are enrolled in scheduled activities such as sports, Arts sessions and so on. In today's society, birthday parties now often consist of structured activities rather than free play events, with various entertainers such as magicians and clowns being provided or, alternatively, with locations chosen for their action specific equipment such as children's indoor play centres. If this is a true representation of Irish childhood then when and where does free childhood play occur?

Together, the researchers, then based at IT Sligo and Early Childhood Ireland decided that data was needed to establish both parental attitudes to play and

children's level of opportunity for play in all its forms. They were supported by their organisations to develop a research project that included participation from 1700 families across 240 communities on the island of Ireland. Ethical clearance for the project was processed through IT Sligo. The resulting data sets baseline knowledge of how children in modern Ireland are really playing.

2 LITERATURE ON 'PLAY'

Play is a “quintessential childhood activity” (Glenn, Knight, Holt & Spence, 2012, p. 185) and as such, children are expert players from birth. The baby plays with sounds and people, learning about the world through their senses. Play becomes increasingly social as the toddler learns how to be in the world with others and engages in pretense, creating stories and scripts from experience. In play, young children begin to read intention in others; focus on others; display joint attention (Bruner, 1995); and, engage in social referencing. Rich creativity and innovation is evident in children's socio-dramatic play, which houses the beginnings of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993).

Play is intrinsically educational. Play is described as a “context for learning” (DEEWR, 2009) and therefore has great value for the holistic development of the child. Essential characteristics of valuable early play experiences are primarily that it is fun and enjoyable, chosen by the children or invented by the children. It is also

essential that it is integrating in nature involving the minds, bodies, spirits and senses of the children involved (Wood, 2009). Free play engages children with their inner self as well as encouraging the development of social competence through engagement with others (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). Early childhood is a fertile ground for exploration and learning through play. Learning gives the child a sense of satisfaction, it is inherently pleasurable. Gray (2009) asserts that a key element of play is its self-directed nature, and therefore play is an enjoyable, rather than stressful, experience. A measure of how successful a play experience has been, from a learning point of view, is how satisfied the child is by the play experience. This personal motivation gained through truly constructive play is both stimulating and exciting for the child as they continue to learn and develop. Play is recognised as “a powerful vehicle for learning” (Anning, 2005, p. 20) that provides an avenue for children to bridge internal activities with external ones (Lindqvist, 1995). Neighbourhood play, as a representation of free play is therefore intrinsically educational.

Play is the essence of learning. The richer the play, the richer the learning outcomes for the child (Broadhead, 2004). This is especially true in relation to young children’s playfulness as an exploratory drive; an innate sense to discover is ignited through being free to play. Developmentally, vital competencies for life such as self confidence and self discipline are established through self directed free play (Gardner & Rinaldi, 2001). The abilities to take risks and exercise judgment have their roots in early risky play (Ball, 2002; Sandseter, 2007). Even knowledge acquisition skills are laid down through a love of learning developed in early childhood through an internalisation of the fun that learning can bring and a lifelong

sense of joy through learning by association (Montessori, 1996). Reflection, the essence of critical and analytical skills can only come through experience of self initiated, experimental learning. Although skills of critical reflection only appear as the faculty of judgment develops nearer to secondary school age, the younger this occurs the deeper ingrained these integrated reflective abilities are (Steiner, 1981). While it is acknowledged that a balance of play activities is necessary for holistic child development and learning, the more present the will of the child is within a play activity, the better it is for many different types of development (Broadhead, 2004). Free play, where the will of the child is paramount, is the most effective play for holistic development.

Both conceptual and empirical studies (Craft, McConnon & Matthews, 2012; Cremin, Chappell & Craft, 2013) have indicated that children's creativity is guided or driven by possibility thinking, that is, considering the shift from *what is* to *what is possible*. In these studies, play was identified as an enabling context for 'possibility thinking' as an everyday habit or occurrence, particularly with younger children. Key features of 'possibility thinking' with children in the 4-7 year old age range included: asking questions, playing, risk-taking, being imaginative, self-determination and intent. Within a study of four year olds in an early years setting (Craft, et al., 2012) narrative emerged as key to 'possibility thinking'. Narrative is understood as being an "organising device or a mode of thought" (Bruner, 1986) through which we construct our worlds (Cremin et al., 2012). Narrative allows imaginative exploration of a symbolic world and facilitates movement beyond the here and now.

Play creates conditions conducive for intelligence to develop in both process and product (Bruce, 2011). Opportunities to engage in play episodes with time, space and a supportive environment reflect an experience that lifts children out of the pedestrian and commonplace to enable them to do things that are creative and imaginative (Bruce, 2011). Play is a natural context for learning and development: innate, freely engaged in and promoting creativity in thought and behaviour. Providing for play is providing for creative and innovative thinking. If learning can be supported and developed (Antonietti, 2000; Fleith, Renzulli & Westberg, 2002; Saxon et al., 2003) this premise centralises experience in children's learning.

3 METHODOLOGY

This was a descriptive study designed to uncover children's play patterns in modern Ireland. The research design encompassed two phases of data collection. The purpose of data collection was to establish parental attitudes to play, children's level of outdoor play, their play choices and their play opportunities. This design provided the researchers with the parent's perspective on their children's play as well as data on the children's play itself. 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 mixed method 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). Phase one, the structured questionnaire, was undertaken in the respondent's home. It was felt that collecting data in this location would assist the respondent to feel at ease and facilitate a longer questionnaire instrument (Robson, 2011, p. 245). The questionnaire consisted of 22 items and took approximately 20 minutes for participants to complete. Phase two, naturalistic 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, it was recognised that children may feel uncomfortable communicating with unfamiliar adults (Punch, 2002). It was, therefore, decided that non-participant observation would be employed, as adults are unable to truly participate in children's social worlds (Hill, 1997; Fine & 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 collected through phase one was analysed quantitatively; frequencies and cross tabulations were performed. Analysis of the observations involved a simple coding system (Robson, 2011, p. 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 mixed method approach to this investigation allowed for data to be gathered on activities across multiple categories of play. This approach resulted in both a quantitative dataset and qualitative narrative on neighbourhood play. Findings of phase two were analysed comparatively alongside the results of the parental survey.

The sampling technique utilised for this research 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. This sample of participants included 1700 families across 240 communities across Ireland. The 240 communities were spread across 18 locations on the island of Ireland and included 6 cities, 6 large towns and 6 rural counties.

4 FINDINGS: CHILDREN'S PLAY CHOICES

Results indicated that the social, historical, cultural, economic and geographical positioning of children impacted greatly on their engagement with play. The following key findings were identified:

4.1 Amounts of time spent playing indoors and outdoors: Socio-economic differences

The average amount spent playing was 4 hours on weekdays and 6 hours on weekend days. On average, these were equally divided between indoor and outdoor play. However, children from disadvantaged areas were spending significantly more time playing outside than children from either middle class or affluent backgrounds. Affluent children were more likely to play in their own playroom while children from disadvantaged areas were more likely to play all over the house when indoors. Middle class children played least and also spent the most time on their school homework.

4.2 Children's play spaces

The top three areas children were using to play outside were green areas in estates (30%), estate roads (29%) and park play spaces (9%). However, testament to the theory that children will play anywhere, other play spaces observed in lesser quantities were; footpaths, laneways, fields, car parks, the sea front, Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) grounds, between train tracks and vacant lots.

Play space choices did not alter significantly across rural areas, cities or towns. It also did not alter greatly across socio-economic groups.

4.3 Engagement with nature and electronics during outside play

There were a low number of observations of interaction with nature. In total there were 25 observations (14%) of nature elements being used within play and a further 12 (7%) observations of sensory exploration. Examples included: jumping in and throwing things into puddles; using pieces of wood or sticks within play; climbing trees and using natural materials to build camps. Of the observations of interaction with nature, more were from disadvantaged areas. 15 (60%) were from disadvantaged areas, 7 (28%) from middle class and 3 (12%) from affluent areas.

Only 8% of observations recorded children interacting with electronics in outdoor play. Half of these used electronic equipment with others. Just over half of those engaged with electronics used these full-time. The number of observations of interaction with electronics did not vary greatly depending on area or socio-economic indicator.

4.4 Children's play choices across domains

The most observed type of play was Motor play (51%), followed by Social play (27%), Imaginative play (14%) and Constructive play (8%). Locomotor/movement was the most common form of Motor play. With Social play, negotiation was the most commonly observed behaviour. The dominant choice within the Imaginative sphere was role play while within Constructive play examination/object manipulation was the most frequently observed type of play.

4.5 Play equipment used in outdoor play

Football was the most frequently observed piece of play equipment (39%) and bikes were also frequently observed (24%). Spaces children used to play outside or play objects used did not differ greatly depending on area or socio-economic indicator, with the exception of bikes. There were more observations of children from middle socio-economic areas using bikes.

4.6 The absence of play: Lower levels of play in affluent neighbourhoods

There were 65 recorded observations (27% of the total study's scheduled observations) that occurred in play spaces during peak play times, such as afterschool and weekends, where no play was found to be taking place. 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.

Significant differences were evident across location and socio-economic differentials. 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 class areas while 25% were observed in disadvantaged areas.

Socio-economic (SE) analysis of the play time findings indicates that more children from disadvantaged SE areas play outside for longer on weekdays while almost three quarters (74%) of children from affluent SE areas play outside for up to three hours. Almost two thirds (65%) of children from disadvantaged SE areas play outside for four or more hours.

SE analysis of average hours of play outside at weekends indicates a similar trend. Children from disadvantaged SE areas played outside for longer, with almost a half (48%) playing outside for 6 hours or more compared to 21% those from affluent SE areas.

4.7 Rural children playing more outdoors in wild areas and wet weather

Just less than 19% of children played outdoors in wild areas. Of those who played outside in wild areas, more children (nearly half) were from rural houses.

Of the 438 children, just over 26% played outside often in bad weather. While the majority of children who played outside in bad weather were from suburban houses, there was a higher incidence of children from rural houses playing outside in bad weather. Socio-economic analysis does not appear to highlight any real differences in the incidences of play outside often in bad weather across these communities.

4.8 Parental perspectives on their children's play choices

Parents were asked about the kinds of activities their children engaged in. The top four activities children engaged in were 'watching TV and films' (71%), 'spontaneous sports' (58%), 'being creative at home' (56%) and 'play with electronic games' (56%).

Further analysis of the top four activities children were engaged in across the ages of 0 to 15 and across both genders highlighted some differences. More boys than girls watched TV/films and played with electronics while more girls than boys engaged in spontaneous sports and creative activities

Supplementary analysis indicated that age does not appear to greatly impact TV/film viewing. There is a slight drop in the number of children that engaged in spontaneous sports from the age of 9 onward. There is a steady increase in the number of boys that engaged in creative activities until a peak at the age of seven. For girls, more creative play occurred as they got older, predominantly from the age of 3 onward, peaking at age 10. Also as children got older they played more with electronic games.

5 INTERACTIONS

5.1 Group dynamics

Overall, positive group dynamics (97%) were observed much more than negative group dynamics (3%). The most frequently observed indicators of group dynamic were smiling and laughing (33%) and listening with a positive response (28%). These positive dynamics were observed in both genders across all age categories.

Individual instances of negative dynamics of group and peer interactions (3%) included aggressive physical behaviour, aggressive verbal behaviour and exclusion.

Most of the instances of negative behaviour were observed in boys. All of the instances of aggressive physical behavior were observed in boys, aged between 4 and 12. The instances of aggressive verbal behaviour were observed in boys aged between 0 and 7 and girls aged between 8 and 11. The instances of exclusion were observed in boys aged between 4 and 15.

5.2 Gender interaction

66% of parents said their children had opposite gender friendships. For the most part, type of dwelling does not greatly impact opposite gender relationships. There was a fairly even spread of opposite gender relationships across the different dwelling types. However more children from rural houses (82%) engaged in opposite gender friendships while slightly fewer children from suburban houses (60%) engaged in opposite gender relationships.

The observational data shows more gender interaction observed in cities with 42% of observations of gender interaction in city areas, a further 32% were in rural areas and the remaining 26% in town areas. Two fifths (42%) were observed in middle socio

economic areas, almost one third (30%) in disadvantaged areas and the remainder (28%) in affluent areas.

5.3 Play enriching the community

Overall, 96% of parents felt children playing outside makes the neighbourhood nicer, helps families get to know each other and improves community spirit.

6 SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIFFERENCES IN PARENTAL ATTITUDES TO PLAY

Parents were overwhelmingly in favour of outdoor play (99%) and freedom (93%). Of those who felt freedom was not important, significantly more were from disadvantaged areas. A majority also believed children's safety to be the paramount consideration during play (81%). Of the 19% who did not consider it the paramount consideration, significantly more were from affluent neighbourhoods with the converse also running true as 96% of parents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods felt it was the paramount consideration. The key finding here is that the more affluent the family, the more in favour of freedom and the less concerned about safety.

While most parents didn't feel that their neighbourhoods were dangerous or hazardous (72%), the vast majority of those that did were from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Parents from disadvantaged neighbourhoods were also much more concerned about traffic, hazards and child abduction. Middle class parents recorded that they felt their children didn't necessarily have enough time to play, these figures were less for the other two socio-economic groups.

The observational study found the more disadvantaged the neighbourhood the more the children were found playing. It also found the hours of play to be longer in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the levels of supervision to be lower. As this contradicts what parents said about their values in relation to both freedom and safety, parents were asked for their opinion on why play levels and levels of freedom were higher in some neighbourhoods and lower in others when both communities were made up of families. The parents in both categories identified the time constraints that some families put on neighbourhood play through their choices around scheduled activities after school and at weekends as the reason for this.

7 PARENTAL ANALYSIS OF THE ACTIVITIES THEIR CHILDREN ENGAGE IN

7.1 Reading books

Just over half of all parents said their children read books. There was an even spread of respondents from the three socio-economic (SE) areas, with just notably more from middle SE areas reading books.

7.2 Visiting friends and neighbours

As can be seen in our findings there was an even split between boys and girls who visited friends and neighbours. Further analysis indicates that more boys visited friends and neighbours between the ages of 4 and 9, while the frequency of girls visiting friends and neighbours is somewhat more consistent from the age of 4 onward

7.3 Organised sport

SE analysis of the 48% of parents who said their child played organised sports indicates a somewhat even spread of responses. The only variation is that notably fewer parents from disadvantaged areas said their child played organised sports.

7.4 Creative Activities

SE analysis of the 32.5% of parents who said their child engaged in creative activities indicates that significantly less children from disadvantaged SE areas engage in creative activities. One fifth of respondents were from disadvantaged SE areas, while two fifths were from middle class areas and the remaining two fifths were from affluent SE areas.

7.5 Games they invent themselves

44% of parents said their child played games they invent themselves. Analysis of the type of house lived in does not appear to impact the instances of children playing games they invent themselves. Furthermore, SE area analysis does not indicate any large differences in responses; 31.5% were from affluent SE areas, 35.7% were from middle SE areas and 32.8% were from disadvantaged SE areas.

Very slightly more boys (51.7%) played games they invent themselves and in the case of both genders, after the age of 8, there was a marked decrease in the instances of children playing games they invent themselves.

7.6 Traditional games which parents recognise from their own childhoods

43% said their children played traditional games they recognise from their childhood. Gender and age analysis indicates again that slightly more boys (52.5%) than girls played traditional games. From the age of 9 onward there was a notable decrease in the number of boys playing traditional games, while there was 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 lived in did not appear to greatly influence the incidents of playing traditional games as, for the most part, only minor differences were evident. There is one notable exception, however, that in the case of urban apartments, no parent said their child plays traditional games they recognise from their own childhood.

7.7 Play outside

Most children played inside the house on a daily basis (88%) and an equal number played less outside in winter. Just over a quarter of parents said their children played outside in bad weather while 15% said their children played outside on dark evenings.

Interestingly, house type did not appear to impact the frequency of play outside with one exception; more of those who rarely played outside came from urban apartments.

Children played outside for longer at weekends. 54% of children played outside for between 1 and 3 hours on weekdays, while a further 23% played outside for 4-5

hours on weekdays. At the weekend it differed somewhat with 75% of children playing outside for between 2 and 4 hours and a further 10% playing outside for 5 hours. SE area analysis indicates that more children from disadvantaged SE areas played outside for longer on both weekdays and weekends.

8 GENERATIONAL CHANGES IN PLAY

The quantitative data derived from the parental survey presented significant changes in play patterns over the last generation. While the amount of time that children had to play a generation ago is, on average, not dramatically different from today's children when the figures are analysed together, when they are analysed across socio-economic groupings, we see that significantly more middle class parents feel they had more time to play than their children do. Conversely, children of affluent and disadvantaged parents are enjoying greater amounts of play time than their parents did. This is especially so in disadvantaged families where these figures are more significantly different than in affluent families.

The most dramatic changes, however, relate to levels of freedom and levels of time spent outdoors. Over 80% of all parents believe that they experienced significantly more freedom than their children do. Over 80% of parents also believe that they spent significantly more time outdoors than their children do. In addition, 82% of parents walked to school as children whereas only 38% of their children do so now.

9 IMPACT OF PHYSICAL HOME ENVIRONMENT ON OPPORTUNITY TO PLAY

Opinions were divided on whether family living arrangements impacted their child's opportunity to play; 39% felt their living arrangements impacted their child's

opportunity to play while 38% felt their living arrangements do not at all impact their child's opportunity to play. Further analysis indicates that the SE indicator did not influence these opinions. However analysis on type of dwelling highlights one major difference: all of those who lived in urban apartments felt their living arrangements impacted their child's opportunity to play.

10 THE IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

10.1 The role of education

The findings from this research illustrate falling levels of freedom and falling levels of outdoor time, including incidental exercise, between this generation of children and their parents' childhood. The data also indicates that children's free time is being squeezed to accommodate scheduled activities at the expense of free play time in the community. These generational changes are significant. Due to the high educational value of play, it is imperative that children are empowered to experience it. If children's levels of play within neighbourhoods are being compromised then it stands to reason that a response from schools is justifiable.

Within a primary school setting, the opportunities for play are influenced by both the curriculum and by the teacher's approach to learning (Craft, 2005). A classroom where interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning is encouraged will offer more opportunities for developing skills that previous generations were empowered to learn outside of the classroom. Interdisciplinary learning is where two or more disciplines are brought together to form new knowledge (Boix Mansilla & Gardner,

2004). An example is studying evolution through a variety of mediums such as archaeology, paleontology, biology, theology and so on (Craft, 2005).

Transdisciplinary learning is where closely related subjects can be used together to learn new knowledge (Nikitina & Boix Mansilla, 2003). Examples include Science and Maths, History and Geography, Language and Literacy. This approach is very achievable within primary schools as each class has one teacher rather than a team of subject teachers as exists within later educational structures. One teacher working with a group can build interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning approaches easily and effectively.

Freedom and space are important concepts for the development of play based skills through childhood education. Space is the central premise of the environment that best facilitates holistic development and is supported by time and freedom to explore. Freedom emerges as a complex pedagogical concept encompassing educator attitude, knowledge, style and commitment. Empowerment, co-participation, unified learning, reflective practice and mindfulness emerge as central components of a pedagogy where play can drive learning. Freedom can be facilitated by educational policy but in reality, it is the pedagogical stance of the educator that will determine the depth to which it is applied as a principle for supporting and holistic learning in childhood educational settings.

The attitude of the teacher and how they communicate this to the children is of paramount importance. Creating an awareness in the group that the children can go to far reaching places within their imagination and within their play is part of this

attitude. Nurturing the motivation to be playful by supporting children to find personal relevance in their learning activities is key. Identifying with children what their strengths and interests are, and providing hands on opportunities to approach them playfully, will most likely result in those opportunities being utilised by the children in effective and meaningful ways.

Encouraging divergent thinking, celebrating difference and rewarding expression and courage will all contribute to the development of creativity for this age group (Runco & Acar, 2012; QCA, 2005). Teacher reflection on the sense of time, rather than hurriedness, and an attitude based on patience and the communication of this sense of time and space will be beneficial for student's ability to process creative concepts. This sense of time is essential, even if the teacher is under curricular coverage pressure. Reflection on how to achieve curricular goals and maintain a sense of unhurriedness within the classroom is a key task for the teacher who wishes to support the type of holistic development that children naturally achieve through play. Using pedagogical approaches that seek to integrate subjects and bring learning alive also results in greater depth of learning and deeper knowledge acquisition, both of which are inherently important aspects of learning. With neighbourhood play time under pressure, perhaps it is time for a "call to play"—to advocate that school becomes a more playful place.

CONCLUSION

Literature asserts that play, in its true sense, is freely chosen, process rather than product orientated and is controlled by the players (Kearns, 2013). Children are experts at play—it is the context through which all learning and development occurs (DEEWR, 2009). Children’s play invokes all domains; the emotional, social, cognitive, creative, spiritual and physical capacities are all engaged. Experiences of play assist children to develop creativity as they become engrossed in the realm of imagination. Through this research, the play experiences of children aged 0-15 were explored to ascertain what is happening in children’s neighbourhood play in Ireland today. This research has been significant in illustrating the nature of neighbourhood play and the way in which this context provides children with an avenue for playing which is otherwise currently diminishing as societal structures take away from this opportunity. Findings indicated that generational changes in play experiences are evident. In acknowledging the powerful role of play in the life of the child and the long term gains for the individual and society, schools must acknowledge the “call to play”. This ground breaking research on the changing face of childhood points clearly to the need for collaborative, co-participative, democratic, empowering and playful pedagogies within schools and educational policies which support them.

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