Ameliorating free-flow play for young children through increased access to school play spaces indoors and out
Reflections on an Irish context

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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. Síolta: 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 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).

*pseudonyms have been used

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, forges 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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