

Supporting Play - Supporting Quality

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Background

IPPA, as an organisation representing its members, has always been committed both to the child's right to play and to play as the key learning medium of the child. Within the IPPA Quality Improvement Programme, we set out to develop an action research approach to improving the quality of practice in Irish early childhood services. We are particularly interested in the dynamic quality of the experiences and relationships of children and adults in services and we sought to document these experiences and relationships in a way that allowed us to reflect, share, critique and plan to improve them. To this end, IPPA Quality Development Officers began to make observations (with video) in services as children and adults went about their daily activities, particularly play. Evaluating these experiences was a challenge as we sought to identify children's needs and appropriate adult responses. Questions about how to improve the physical layout, the materials, the interactions, the supports, the teaching and learning strategies were difficult. IPPA staff came together to share analysis of the video and in the process to share some amazing insights. Crucially we changed the question from 'what are the needs, the deficits of these children for which we must compensate' to 'what are the competencies and interests demonstrated by these children and how can we extend them?'. Then the ideas flowed because in each and every episode we came to recognise the learning that these children had already achieved and the meaning making process in which they were already deeply engaged. We began to document competent agentive children as they demonstrated their skills in play.

We then embarked on ethnographic research with the aim to collect data to support the research question 'What are children doing and learning in play?' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004) presents the findings from both research approaches and the analysis is linked to post-modern theoretical concepts.

'Power of Play: A Play Curriculum in Action', produced and published by IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation and funded by the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation is a collection of stories, divided into 3 sections.

- 1 Stories derived from the observations and video footage collected by IPPA Quality Officers as part of the ethnographic research;
- 2 Stories documented by programme participants as part of the reflective, action research process;
- 3 Stories collected from children themselves as they reflect on and explain their play activities.

Rationale

The work has been influenced by the (1) constructivist and socio-cultural view of learning, proposed by Piaget (1965a; 1962; 1965; 2001) and Vygotsky (1967; 1978) respectively (2) by the 'pedagogy of listening' underpinning the Reggio educational approach (Edwards *et al.*, 1993) and (3) the *Te Whariki* Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996) and the 'learning stories' (Carr, 2001) approach to documentation and assessment. It has been affirmed and complemented by the approach to curriculum adopted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2004) in '*Towards a Framework for Early Learning*' and is contributing to the 'Quality' debate with which we are presently engaged. Play needs advocates. Research (Alexander *et al.*, 1995; Anning and Edwards, 1999; Ball, 1999) indicates that play in early childhood education is threatened by more formal, teacher directed curricula for children at a younger and younger age. Furthermore, earlier IPPA research, '*Child's Play*' (Carswell 2002) found a range of contradictions between the theory and practice of play in childcare services and recommended that the childcare provider must "...step back, withdraw and observe what the child is doing, how the child is learning..." in order to support play (Carswell 2002:23). Likewise, play researchers such as Nicolopoulou (1993), Sutton Smith (1997) and Gussin Paley (1997) insist that to understand and be true advocates for the full potential of play, we must study play in action in naturalistic settings. We undertook this task.

We intended to support two important shifts in perspective: (1) from a deficit view of the child working as an individual, embodied in stage development theory, to a view of the socially interactive complex child negotiating meaning in a cultural context and (2) to move beyond a focus on school promoted cognitive skills and the emphasis on literacy and numeracy to embrace learning as holistic and to recognise cognition as socio-affective (Fein 1985; Dunn 1987; Trevarthen, 1992). The '*Power of Play: A Play Curriculum in Action*' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004) demonstrates that when we change the observation lens, we get a different perspective. The process has created a 'community of learners' engaged in shared thinking and developing a new and exciting pedagogy. The book is about children and adults learning and teaching together and in keeping with a strengths based approach; it limelights the skills and competencies of both children and adults as they engage with this learning and teaching.

Theoretical Context

Constructivism and Socio-culturalism

"How we conceptualise play depends on our understanding of learning and related cognitive concepts and on our interpretations of what is educationally and developmentally significant to children about play." (Woods and Attfield, 1996:20) In early childhood, our understanding of development and learning has been deeply influenced by Piaget and Vygotsky.

Piaget (1954) identified three stages of play; practice play, symbolic play and play with rules to correspond to the sensori-motor, pre-operational and concrete operational stages of development of intelligence. He proposed that play progresses from the child's mental structure and individual processes to social play and negotiated meaning and symbolism. While Piaget (1962; 1965) recognises the social context of the child, he foregrounds the individual cognising child. In 'Ali, the Scientist' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:2), one could interpret that Ali first explores the concept of flow before communicating with his playmate. In 'You be the Fireman' (IPPA, Brennan 2004:4), the children first discover how to siphon water and then assimilate the new-found skill into a play script. In Piagetian mode, Hutt (1979) describes the first step as 'exploratory' play and the second as 'ludic' play and maintains that new learning happens in the first phase while 'ludic' play is about consolidation. Many of the stories, however, suggest; (1) that exploration is part of 'ludic' play, as in 'Des and the Bouncy Castle' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:56); (2) that children continue to develop schema through play as in 'Ali, the Enveloper' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:24) and; (3) share their knowledge in play as in many of the stories, for example, 'The Waterfall' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:54).

On the other hand, Vygotsky emphasised that rather than developing as individuals, children develop within a cultural matrix, interconnecting two key elements (1) a system of social relationships and interactions within a society and (2) the cultural conceptual and symbolic system. The child is enculturated into these systems through social interaction in activity, particularly with more capable community members, both peers and adults. Participation in cultural ways of interacting, of working together, of communicating and representing knowledge not only teach meaning but provide the tools for the on-going construction of meaning and function. In play, children both represent cultural experiences and ways of knowing and reconstruct meaning. The child inherits the cultural resources accumulated by that society, including a linguistic and symbolic system, cognitive frameworks, cultural artefacts and a bank of knowledge. These resources guide how children see and interpret experiences throughout their lives. Vygotsky's analysis of play is embedded in this sociocultural theory. What Piaget sees as individual constructions, Vygotsky sees as sociocultural constructions. "*What passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes the rules of behaviour in play.*" (Vygotsky 1967:9). In play the child initiates imaginary situations and voluntarily submits to the rules of that situation. "*These rules derive their force from the child's enjoyment of, and commitment to the shared activity of the play world*" (Nicolopoulou, 1993:14). These are the generally agreed elements of any definition of play.

Clearly, in the story 'The Bold Girls' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:62) there are specific rules of behaviour for sisters, mothers and 'bold' girls, some of which the girls implicitly understand and some of which they must step outside the play frame to make explicit

and agree. By demanding agreement on the rules, play performs an important role in both reconstructing and reinforcing social expectations. Again, in the story 'The Day Everybody Scored' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:24) we observe children, not just playing football, but playing at being 'professional' footballers. Children demonstrate remarkable attention to the detail involved in the body manoeuvres and communication style and seem to share common experiences and interpretations that they bring to the play. The point of the exercise is not to score goals but to engage physically, socially and emotionally in the process of being footballers. Throughout this research, the image of the participating, cultural, constructing child framed our observations and was strongly reinforced by what we saw and heard. Hayes (2003:75) proposes that "*...this recognition of the active and social nature of learning is the key to refocusing attention on the relationship between play, care and learning.*"

Emotion and Cognition

Trevarthen (1993:48) defines emotions as "*...intrinsically generated, central, regulatory states of the brain that unify awareness and co-ordinate the activity of a coherent, mentally-active subject.*" Emotion and cognition are inseparable. Humans, from the earliest age, need to give experiences emotional values that match the feelings of other people. Emotions are the key to intersubjectivity, and consequently, to cultural knowledge. We are born with a need to be part of a culture. Babies from the early days of life become involved in "*...protoconversational exchanges of expression with other people.*" (Trevarthen 1991:90) By six months a baby is eager to play with familiar playmates and "*...in the next few years play becomes richer in imagery and memory. It becomes the driving force of the child's mental work.*" (Trevarthen, 1991:93)

In recent times, research emphasises this social, emotional child. Fein (1985) suggests that play is motivated more by feelings than by reflections on reality, as implied in the exaggerated and fantastic worlds that children create in their play. She proposes that children are driven by such primary emotions as love, anger, joy and fear and the pretence frame of play provides the security and protection for their expression. It is permissible to express strong emotion when one is only pretending. Goncu (1999:22) proposes that "*...children's recognition of similarity in their affective needs creates a joint focus in their pretend play.*" They negotiate both differences deriving from their individual understanding and the joint pretend representation of affect. Corsaro's (1999:23) research shows that in play "*...children learn how to interact to achieve mutual understanding.*" Rayna's (2001:114) study of children's play concludes that "*...providing children with early opportunities for a meeting of minds with others, both adults and peers, favours the development of a sense of togetherness and a feeling of belonging to a community.*" This interest in 'togetherness' was found in abundance by De Haan and Singer (2001), Hannikainen (2001) and others. Dunn (1987:112) again identifies this interconnectedness

of emotions and cognition. Her study of interactions among siblings suggests that children use their intelligence on what matters most to them emotionally and these emotions arouse their "*vigilance and attentive powers.*"

Like Vygotsky, these researchers see play as having a socio-emotional motivation rather than a purely cognitive one. We see this in the 'The Fire brigade' story (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:34). Children engage with crisis situations, express fear, panic, relief and love. Gussin Paley (2004) tells us that children's playscripts and storytelling, like theatre and novels, often follow such universal themes as "*...someone is lost and finds a friend, is unloved and finds love, confronts life and death, is weak and then strong.*" This is the appeal of the story Owl Babies (Waddel, 1992) in the play scene 'Owls in the Wood' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:60). In 'the Interactive Child' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:6), we follow Nicole and her friends as they build their houses and become neighbours, clearly engaging with building 'togetherness'. In 'Tea with Diarmuid' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:18), Diarmuid radiates with pleasure in the ritual of making and sharing tea. In 'Eoin Supports his Team' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:66), Eoin demonstrates how identification with a local hurling team builds community bonding and encourages engagement with valued skills and knowledge. The strong emotional bond motivates Eoin to proactively ensure that his community is equally well represented in his Naíonra/playgroup. This kind of complex knowing can only happen through agentic participation in the activity of a community. Play engages in complex social activity and consequently is a key medium that allows children "*...to draw and reflect back upon the interrelated domains of emotional, intellectual and social life.*" (Nicolopoulou, 1993:13)

Play as Pedagogy

In a society where children have little access to the working lives of adults, pretend play becomes all the more important. It is both a learning and teaching tool. It allows children to enter and experience spheres of adulthood that in real life they can only observe from a distance or on a television screen. In other societies, children, through a process of guided participation (Rogoff, 1990), are initiated into the trades and survival skills of adults from a very young age. We know that in Western industrialised societies children play more and adults encourage them and partake in play (Goncu, 1999). Perhaps this is the culture's way of compensating for children's exclusion from real life apprenticeship opportunities.

Rogoff (1990:39) draws parallels between the roles of young children and the roles of novices in apprenticeship. They both actively try to make sense of new situations and put themselves in a position to learn. The apprenticeship model often involves a group of novices who are a resource to one another in developing skill and understanding. They differ in levels of expertise and act, within the group, both as teachers and learners. In

play, children, sometimes supported by adults, do likewise. They imaginatively create a world based on their previous and combined experiences, which they can co-construct and direct. As children become more familiar with one another, we know that the play scenes are repeated and the play becomes more complex. With practice, children are quicker to move into role and become more knowledgeable and skilled in meeting the demands of the role.

In 'Engineers at Work' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:20), the children enter the community of engineers involved in developing a water scheme. They shout instructions to one another, staying in role and at the same time guiding the participation of others. In 'Hairdressers' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:16), Mary scaffolds the play through the provision of trade tools and in her role as client in the play scene. Children take on these roles in all their complexity, combining knowledge, skills, attitudes and emotions. If planning is valued in that community, children practice planning. If literacy is important then children engage with literacy. If creativity or co-operation is valued in that pretence community, children learn these skills. The educator both provides opportunities and 'scaffolds' (Woods *et al.*, 1976) participation in the community of practice so that children become more expert (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Many of the stories in 'Power of Play' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004) demonstrate this pedagogy in action. Open-ended materials allow for the intricate construction of a motorway in 'Redesigning the M50' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:22). A wonderful set design allows children to explore one of life's big questions "*How does Santa get down the chimney?*" in Christmas Story (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:28). Eileen supports Seán through his problem solving but follows his initiative in 'The Road that Seán Built' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:36). He emerges with a sense of personal mastery and achievement. Zoe chats to Martin about his shopping in 'From A to B and Back Again' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:26). Each storyteller, like Teresa in 'The Teacher as Learner' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:45) is involved in an assessment process that is about identifying strengths and interests and co-formulating and sharing these assessments with significant people in the child's life. The observant adult promotes valued knowledge through the assessment process. In 'Building Togetherness' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:32), David plays an obvious lead role in designing the structure but the critical eye also identifies Seán's exceptional role in building inclusion and co-operation. These are contributions worthy of note and by sharing our observations, we recognise their value. Family and carers alike become involved in the assessment and planning process. Play themes and activities become the link between family, practitioner and community, bringing together the broader life and experience of the child into the meaning making web. 'Gone Fishing' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:46) is a powerful reminder of that partnership.

In the early years, Gussin Paley (1997) tells us "...an intuitive programme called play, works so well that the children learn the language, mannerisms and meaning of all the people with whom they live." They learn to negotiate, to compromise, to develop a theory of mind (Leslie, 1987), to direct and choreograph within the complexity of the social activity. Play is an embedded, holistic way of learning. Add to this, the pleasure of play (Bruce, 1991), its capacity to totally involve the players (Laevers, 1994), to induce a sense of mastery (Reynolds and Jones, 1996) to allow a state of flow (Czicksentmihayli, 1989), its role in keeping humans and animals ecologically adaptive (Sutton Smith, 1997), and we have a strong case for play. It is the key to quality learning experiences in early childhood, with implications for each and every dimension of a childcare service. In particular, it frames a pedagogical style that primarily recognises the 'community of learners' and the central characteristics of the learner as 'reflection, agency and culture.' (Bruner, 1996) A play curriculum inherently recognises the inseparability of emotion and cognition, and consequently of care and education and values the bio-ecological context in which both are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Going Forward

Data to date comprises a cross section of play episodes selected by IPPA staff and programme participants because they identified them as significant learning moments. The next phase of research will follow the development of play in a playgroup over a year. It is an enquiry into what children do in their play and why they do it and will explore the connections between play activities, relationships and meaning making as they develop in the 'home corner'. This study will be undertaken over a three year period as a PhD thesis, with the support of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). I look forward to sharing the learning.

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