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Occasional Paper 14: The significance of children's play and empowerment: An observational tool

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Introduction

In early childhood there is consensus that children's play is an important aspect of development and learning. There is less agreement, however, around the 'best' way to support children's play and record the rich learning that takes place in informal contexts. The ideology around play and the different ways of supporting children are subjective and educators are influenced by their own understanding that has informed their ideas and experiences. The term 'empowerment', a bit like 'play' is ambiguous, defined in subtly different ways depending on the discipline in which it is used. Here empowerment is examined in relation to children's social play; explored within child-initiated play contexts. This paper offers a way in which empowerment can be observed and recorded, reflecting on the significance of play and empowerment for children's learning experiences.

What is empowerment?

Defining children's empowerment is challenging because, how empowerment is understood and what happens in practice can be very different. Being empowered is often assumed, yet difficult to define because it can also be expected to manifest itself in different ways, depending on the context of the situation and who is involved. Rappaport (1984) argues that it is problematic as a generic term because it encompasses a range of emotions and behaviours suggesting an intangible and elusive concept. He suggests that empowerment can operate on an individual level or can be experienced by a group; seen in behaviour through interactions in social situations and through connections between people such as shared interests. Being empowered is part of a more complex process involving emotions where not everyone may feel empowered at the same time or take the same route to finding a sense of empowerment (Page and Czuba, 1999).

Empowerment should be seen more as a process rather than something that is achieved. It is an enabling process where experiences are made possible through opportunities and by establishing support networks that nurture self-belief, competence and confidence (Ashcroft, 1987). Accordingly children who regularly encounter empowering experiences believe in their own capability and will engage with a positive attitude resulting in positive outcomes. In social play contexts, empowerment may be explained by focusing on ways in which children use their relationships with others through participation, expression of voice and their environment to influence contexts they are involved in (Canning, 2019). They may do this by using a resource in a particular way to encourage other children to copy or join in; they may persuade other children to

change their play to meet their own agenda; or be creative in their environment.

What is play?

The term 'play' is interpreted in many ways in and depends very much on local, historical, social and cultural contexts or traditions. Play is also interpreted according to research interests, as well as cultural influences or personal emphasis (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Even the pioneers of play placed emphasis on different elements depending on their interests and experiences. The unique characteristics and qualities that children express during play, apparent in what they choose to do, who they play with and how their play evolves means that close observation is necessary to reach an understanding of play.

Contemporary understandings of play are wide ranging and the term encompasses a broad ideological spectrum. This inevitably translates into a patchwork of professional practice in supporting children's opportunities to play. Furthermore, even though the opportunities offered in a setting are ostensibly the same for all children, play is such a personal experience that while one child may appear to be having fun, another may not have the same experience. When considering what play means to an individual child, it is important to make distinctions based on the emotional cues being given, such as levels of fun and amount of choice, as well as considering the environmental cues such as the context and location of play (Howard and McInnes, 2013). Therefore, considering play from a child's perspective may provide a starting point for reflection on the significance of play.

Hughes (2001) argues that the essence of play is based on children's intrinsic desire and curiosity. He believes that play is intrinsically motivated, i.e. something that children *have* to do and can be evidenced through children's interactions with different opportunities and their motivation to use those opportunities to satisfy their curiosity. In a similar way, Moyles (2014) considers that children are neither in nor out of play but are more or less playing in different degrees at all times. Play has an immediate impact on children involved in the game and is something that they engage in to make sense of their situation. Play also has a wider influence which is transpersonal; e.g., a play experience impacts on what children are feeling or doing 'in the moment' but also relates to what has happened in the past as well as informing future play.

Creating an ethos based on following children's ideas and motivation requires educators to trust children and value their play. Play can be unpredictable and giving children a

say in what they do means someone has to listen and be prepared to respond sensitively and appropriately (Canning, 2012). Consequently, educators who place play at the centre of practice need to be flexible in their approach and facilitate a space that allows play to develop in a way that the child intends. The wealth of insights into a child's individual qualities and experiences that play can generate should not be underestimated. These considerations form the basis for recognising that children have a capacity for developing ways of seeing the world, problem solving, learning and developing 'meaning making' in their play.

Research design

The research into children's play and subsequent framework for observing empowerment (see diagram on p.4) is based on an ethnographic study exploring indicators of empowerment in child-initiated social play. This qualitative research is based on case study analysis of 7 children, following them in different play contexts. The research consisted of non-participant video observations; semi-structured interviews and talking with children about their play preferences. The data collection included:

Non-participant video observations: Over 8-hours of video collected of child-initiated, social group play in 4 different settings and home environments over a 6-week period.

Practitioner interviews: Individual audio recorded and transcribed interviews with lead/key practitioners supporting the case study children in each of the settings. Three sets of interviews at different points in the research focusing upon:

- Empowerment in the EYFS.
- Children's characters and play preferences.
- Views on how play contributes to empowerment.

Parent interviews: At the beginning and end of the research focused on:

- Own child's characteristics and play preferences and understanding of the term empowerment.
- Thoughts on their child's experience of play after reviewing video observations.

Video stimulated review: Parents and practitioners reviewed video footage of their child/key child stimulating discussion about play, characteristics and empowerment.

Talk with children: Children were shown photographs from the video footage of their play and asked about their favourite play. Smiley face stickers were used to rate the photographs to get a sense of the things they enjoyed.

A new framework for observing play

As a result of systematic thematic content analysis through the process of coding video data, interviews and talking to children, three super-themes emerged:

Participation, Voice and Ownership. They were not always transparent in individual children's play but overall the themes emerged as recurring and, although sometimes subtle, they were instrumental in supporting children's processes of empowerment. The super-themes represent the observed commonalities in children's actions and behaviours across different contexts and provide a basis for rich description of video and interview analysis (Bernard and Ryan, 2010).

The super-themes are interdependent, with the potential to be present in child-initiated, social play simultaneously. Although it does not matter if one, two or all of the super-themes are identifiable in children's play, at least one is needed for a child to be viewed as having an empowering experience. In the clearest examples of children's empowerment, all three super-themes are present during play. Sub-themes of *Motivation, Coordination, Imagination, Problem Solving and Empathy* categorise recurring instances and actions in children's play that support the development of the super-themes. (Illustrative diagrams of the empowerment framework are available upon request).

The empowerment framework can be used as a practical resource for observing play. To avoid the framework becoming a subjective 'tick list' of what children appear to be doing in their play a series of questions prompt educators to really consider what is happening; to put themselves in the children's position and provide a detailed narrative of their play. For example:

Participation

- Where is the child positioning themselves within the play?
- How are they negotiating with others?
- How are they taking part?
- What choices and decisions are they making to be involved in the play?

Ownership

- How is the child showing their familiarity with the play environment?
- How are they embracing play?
- What are their vested interests in the play?
- What are the commonalities between the children?
- How are they in control?
- How are they working together with other children?

Voice

- How is the child's voice evident?
- How are they showing their preferences?
- What are the circumstances when they are being listened to by his/her peers?

There are also key questions for the sub-themes and behavioural indicators of empowerment that support educators in making decisions about how to think and describe what is happening in children's play.

A common practice in England is to observe children in planned activities and look for indicators that suggest learning and development. The empowerment framework moves away from this so that indicators of empowerment are contextualised and provide a rich description of experiences to inform learning and development. In settings, the empowerment framework was trialled as a way of observing children's play. In this example, Michael's key worker filmed his play; building a profile of his empowering experiences. The footage is approximately two-minutes long and she analysed the video soon after. The ability to re-watch Michael's play, record his actions/reactions based on the empowerment framework supported her professional development and understanding of the significance of play. It is quite an undertaking to incorporate the whole of the empowerment framework in one single observation.

Therefore, here the focus is on ownership as the super-theme and coordination as the sub-theme.

Michael's stick fight

Michael is outside in the field walking around the perimeter which has longer grass. He sees something in the undergrowth and moves closer to investigate. He bends down and pulls out a stick which is fairly straight and about a meter in length. He is very happy with his discovery; he grins and does a little hop once he realises how long it is. He looks around, there is no one close by so he begins to drag the stick behind him, moving towards two other boys that are playing in the middle of the field. As the boys see him approach they turn towards him and see the stick. They immediately move towards it, wanting to touch it. Michael holds the one end, and the boys grab the other. The stick is now lifted off the ground and held between the boys. Michael is not very happy about this and lets out a high-pitched cry as he keeps hold of the stick but starts to run.

Taking the others by surprise, they let go as Michael sets off across the field, stick in tow. They run after him and soon catch up. They take the other end of the stick and start to pull. Michael pulls back and starts to tell them off, 'It's my stick! Let go!' The boys don't let go but Michael turns so his back is against the stick which makes the direction of the stick change to a sideways motion. The force at which Michael does this means that the boys stumble, the stick drops to the ground and the weight of Michael's back makes it snap in two. Michael is left holding one end and the boys the other. They all stop for a moment and take in what has happened. The two boys start to laugh; they pick up half of the stick and wave it around making whooshing noises. Michael has the other half and he copies the boys; they are all laughing now as they continue their pretend game.

Written commentary from the educator:

Ownership

How is the child showing his familiarity with the play environment?

Confident to be on his own in the field and go to the edge of the boundary. Most children stay in the middle. He wants to explore the long grass on his own.

How is he embracing play?

Shows excitement when he finds the stick. There is a physical reaction as well as a verbal one. Sense that he wants to share his discovery by taking it over to the other boys but also that he wants to keep hold of it.

What is his vested interest in the play?

The stick, and that he wants to keep hold of it.

What are the commonalities between the children?

They all want the stick!

How is Michael in control of the play?

He is making decisions as the play progresses:

1. He goes towards the boys.
2. When he realises they want the stick he runs away with it.

3. He knows it is going to be difficult to keep hold of the stick, two against one, in a pulling action, so he turns changing the direction of the stick.
4. When the stick breaks, he has the choice to feel upset or to join a new game.
5. His choice to be part of the new game shows his adaptability and that he wants to be part of play with other children.

Michael is also determined – he is not going to give the stick up easily even though it is two against one. He made the decision to take the stick towards the two boys. He could have kept it to himself at the edge of the field so that suggests he wanted to share his discovery.

How is he working together with other children?

He is not working with the other boys to start with. He wants to keep the stick as he found it in the first place. When the stick is broken in half, he then joins in the imaginary game that the others have initiated.

Coordination

How do the child's action reflect his emotional state?

- Defiant verbal communication – 'It's my stick! Let go!'
- Confident – walking over with the stick in the first place, wanting to show the other boys what he has found, but perhaps not expecting their reaction to want to take it off him.
- Determined to keep hold of the stick
- Persisting in making sure he is in control of the stick even if sometimes it looks like he is going to lose it.

How is he showing his capacity to adapt?

When the stick has snapped in two, Michael could have reacted badly, but instead he accepted the situation and played along with the new imaginary game. The stick was adaptable enough to let him do this, as was the environment with no set outcomes or rules.

Educator's thoughts after reviewing the video footage:

'Michael could have easily gone to an adult to try and get his stick back when the boys were so close to taking it from him, but he showed his determination and persistence in sorting it out for himself. I think that's because there wasn't an adult immediately to hand. I'm surprised, because he usually gives up on things quite quickly if they are not going his way. There was obviously something important to him because he wanted to keep the stick. I think you can see that when he finds it and gives an excited squeal. I suppose taking it over to the other children was a way in which he could share that excitement, although I don't think he was expecting them to try and take it off him.'

On the process of observing play using the empowerment framework she reflected:

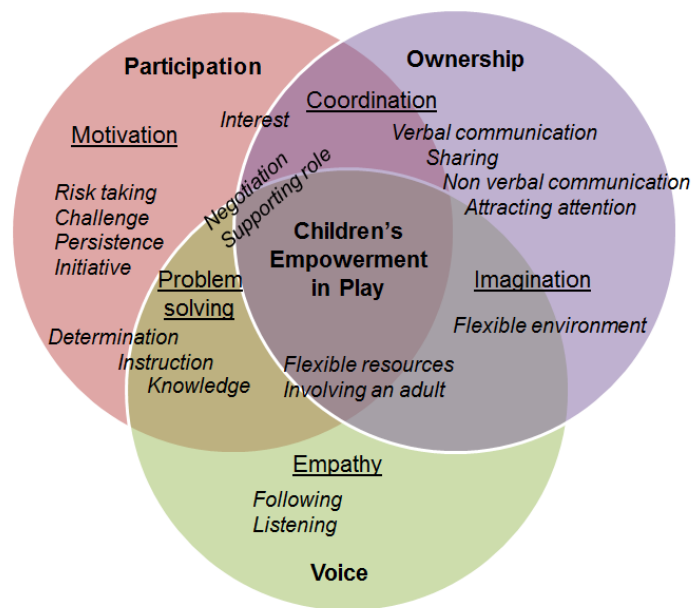
'Filming Michael's play meant that I didn't have to think on my feet and try and write down everything he was doing. It all happened too quickly for that and I think that is why it is easy to dismiss play as a non-event and why people think children aren't doing anything when they play. Being able to review the video and then make my

observation through the question prompts made me think deeper than the superficial 'he did this, he did that.'

Doing observations in this way has meant reorganising our team a bit. I would have normally supported the structured activity that happened after outdoor play, but we agreed that I could review the video and Kate would take responsibility for the activity so it re-distributed our jobs. This meant that I could write up the observation whilst it was still fresh in my mind and I didn't have to leave it until the end of the day when I was tired and didn't want to face a load of paperwork'.

The empowerment framework (below) provides a way in which children's actions and reactions in play can be analysed at a slower pace and revisited. The video can be

shared with parents and other educators; it can be a valuable asset in showing children's progress. Michael's parents were delighted to receive a copy of his play. It gave them an insight into what and who he played with and also enabled them to see connections between his play at home. Recognising children's experiences in play and that they support a process of empowerment can contribute to a new way for educators to plan and reflect upon pedagogic practice. Michael's setting is reviewing how staff are utilised at different points during the daily routine so video observations can be reviewed and reflected upon. A picture of empowerment for each child is then developed over time.



Summary

This paper gives a brief overview of the possibilities for observing empowerment in play. The example demonstrates the influence of educators' perspectives in the decisions on what to observe and their subjectivity in the interpretation of children's play. By drawing on different views from parents and colleagues who know the children, a layered picture is revealed, not only of the complex nature of play and empowerment, but also the significance of individual values and beliefs about the importance of play. A questioning approach provides a platform for exploring children's social worlds, and the empowerment framework enables a way in which educators can examine the intricacies of children's play, the connections they make and why empowerment in play is important for children's learning, development and social relationships.

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[This paper is a condensed example of issues explored more fully in the forthcoming TACTYC series book: Canning, N. (2020) *Children's empowerment in play*. Oxon: Routledge. If you would like to be involved in the next stage of research involving observing empowerment in play please contact: natalie.canning@open.ac.uk.]