‘It’s one of your main things in life like’: Play as Conceptualised by Children

Abstract

Play is widely recognised as important in children’s lives. However, play is inconsistently defined and often defies our full understanding. Further, the role of children in helping to define and understand play is often under-appreciated and under-utilised in research on play. To improve our understanding of play in childhood, we systematically investigated children’s understanding of play through focus groups with 68 children (aged 4-13 years). During 46 focus group sessions, a range of creative and participatory based methods were used to elicit children’s perspectives on play. Using reflexive thematic analysis, themes were identified and three core concepts of play were identified across these themes. These concepts were: (1) the importance of a degree of agency, (2) meaningful (often social) connection, and (3) challenge and complexity, with a clear expectation for play to be fun. These concepts closely align with prominent play theories, and reaffirm characteristics of play that have been identified and highlighted in the wider literature. Implications for future research, policy and practice are outlined, including the need to use our understanding of what play is for children to create authentic play experiences for research and practice purposes.

Keywords: Play, Children’s Perspectives, Consultations, Participatory Research, Theory, Conceptualisations

Introduction

Over the years, theorists across multiple disciplines including anthropology, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and education have grappled with ascertaining a universal understanding of play resulting in varying definitions of play in a field of research that is ‘rife with complexity and ambiguity’ (Weisberg, Hirsh Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013, p.38). Indeed, despite general consensus that we need to have a coherent understanding of play (Howard, 2019; Lillard, 2015), play ‘taunts us with its inaccessibility’ (Zosh et al., 2018, p.1).Yet, there is almost universal agreement that play is an essential part of childhood and must be protected, supported and valued (Howard, 2019; Whitebread et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2019).

Play has traditionally been characterised according to observable characteristics. For example, Takhvar (1988) identified several universal characteristics of play in their review of play theories including that play behaviour appears to be intrinsically motivated, non-literal, free from public rules, distinguishable from exploratory behaviour, focused on means as opposed to ends, and involves active engagement. Similarly, Miller (2017) reported common characteristics of play identified by 16 experts across varying disciplines, characteristics based primarily on ‘how the behaviour looks’ (p.330) such as behaviour that had intrinsic, voluntary, spontaneous, repetitive, exaggerated, fragmented, non-literal, and process-oriented qualities. Play also was often unique to young individuals, promoted positive wellbeing and involved turn-taking and adoption of various play signals. The function of play behaviours has also been important in conceptualising play, as something that is observed to be rewarding, context-dependent, facilitates social interaction, and which has no immediate benefit according to an evolutionary perspective and evidence of evolutionary benefits.

Other theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Parten (1932) have focused on the interactional nature of play experiences and the important presence of ‘mutually oriented challenges and responses’ (Henricks, 2015, p.35); Garvey (1974) has also emphasised the transactional nature of play whereby the

'nonliteral behaviour of one partner is contingent on the nonliteral behaviour of the other partner' (p.163). A further defining feature of play across play theories has involved the concept of intrinsic motivation (Zosh et al., 2018). Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory describes the process of intrinsic motivation as underpinned by the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs i.e. competence, relatedness and autonomy. They further explored the influence of social and environmental conditions in contributing to varying degrees of intrinsic motivation (and associated needs) using their Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET). These three basic needs have been used by some researchers in deepening our understanding of play (e.g. King & Howard, 2016; Ryan, Rigby & Przybylski, 2006) as the components closely align with key features across theories of play. For example, competence is evident where play is driven by challenge (Besio, 2017; Gray, 2013) and allows children to 'create their own zone of proximal development and set appropriate challenges' (Whitebread et al., 2017, p.4). Children's sense of relatedness surrounding connection with others and togetherness is also evident in play (Garvey, 1974; Parten, 1932; Vygotsky, 1978). Finally, autonomy has been highlighted by King and Howard (2016) in their continuum of 'adaptable choice' (p.58) where play must be 'negotiated, compromised and adapted rather than always remaining fixed' (King & Howard, 2016, p.60). Choice, and the influence of environmental and situational factors, is very evident in Eberle's (2014) views that 'play cannot be pulled away from where and when and with whom it takes place' (p.230). Thus, choice is negotiated (Howard, 2019) and involves 'conscious control of one's own behaviour' (Gray, 2013, p.152) in particular within social contexts where play requires children 'to balance their own wants with those of their social partners' (Zosh et al., 2018, p.5).

This idea of negotiation in play and exerting self-control is evident in Vygotsky's work on symbolic play specifically (e.g. 'a child's greatest self-control occurs in play' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.99). In Vygotsky's view (1978), children were obligated to closely adhere to the rules of their adopted role in play which can lead to an apparent paradox: the child 'does what she most feels like doing because play is connected with pleasure-and at the same time she (the child) learns to follow the line of greatest resistance by subordinating herself to rules' (p.99).

Recently, play has been described according to dispositional qualities and the 'experience it generates in its participants' (Henricks, 2015, p.18) with

increased focus on ‘considering playfulness as a psychological state of mind rather than play as an observable activity’ (Howard, 2019, p.202). In Bundy et al.’s (2001) model of playfulness, children’s internal disposition to play is central to playfulness which in turn is based on key characteristics of play such as intrinsic motivation, degree of internal control, freedom to suspend reality and framing play ‘by giving and reading social cues’ (p.278).

Despite similarities across conceptualisations of play outlined here, it has been difficult to ‘converge on a common definition and measurement system for play’ (Neale et al., 2017, p.2). Moreover, the role of children in helping to define and understand play is often underappreciated and underutilised in research on play. In recent years, there have been calls for the systematic investigation of children’s perspectives of play in order to enhance rigour (Howard, 2019) and inform definitions of play (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2024). For example, findings from a recent scoping review of children’s perspectives of play (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2024) revealed close alignment between children’s understanding of play and key themes across theories of play whereby children defined play according to both observable and inward qualities describing play as social, active, creative and imaginative, involving autonomy and agency, positive affect, toys and materials, games, outdoors, adult involvement, learning and development. Nicholson et al. (2014) reported similar levels of synergy across children’s perspectives of play and key characteristics within the literature with children (aged 3-17 years) describing play as involving toys and materials, positive affect, agency and control, active engagement alongside social interactions and relationships. Recently, Mukherjee et al. (2023) found children’s (aged 5-7 years) understanding of play (aged 5-7 years) mirrored fundamental characteristics of play within the literature (pleasurable, social and involving materials, movement, agency, risk, goals, time and focus) and emphasised the inward qualities of play whereby ‘children’s ideas around play are not aligned with specific activities but with the sense of agency in a secure physical and social context when carrying out an intrinsically meaningful activity’ (p.126). However, there is a dearth of research on how children conceptualise play in middle and late childhood (Rao, Gibson & Nicholl, 2020), and research with children is often guided by research questions about specific categories of play (e.g. in what way does play differ from work in educational contexts, and what are children’s opportunities for play?). Further, much of the published literature investigating children’s conceptualisations of play is based

on limited opportunities for children's input (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2024) such as the categorisation of visuals to identify what children conceptualise as play versus not play with calls for player-led methods based on 'players' reflections and representations of their own play' (Johnson & Ip Dong, 2019, p.411).

The Current Study

Play is recognised as a fundamental right of all children (UNCRC, 1989) and integral to children's lives and childhood experiences (Zhao et al., 2019). Strengthening our understanding of play based on children's perspectives is fundamental to enhancing children's quality of life (Howard, 2019). Indeed, children themselves have highlighted the value of understanding their views on play as helping adults to 'get along with children and, like, understand more what we do' (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2024).

Ascertaining a rigorous understanding of play based on children's perspectives is also essential for developing a robust evidence base and investigating causal relationships between play and learning and development; research investigating the role of play in children's learning and development can inform policy and practice (Howard, 2019) and help overcome current gaps in research and knowledge 'in realising the full developmental and educational potential of play in practice (which) has proved elusive' (Whitebread et al., 2012, p.14). This may also support educators in realising the 'educative power' (Gray, 2013, p.139) of play given the increasing shift towards play-based pedagogies (Zosh et al., 2017) and frequently reported uncertainty among practitioners regarding their role in supporting learning through play (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland & Wollscheid, 2019). Developing educators' awareness and understanding of what play is, is fundamental in creating and fostering playful learning environments 'that children themselves feel are play' (Howard, Miles & Gealy, 2009, p.105).

This study aimed to develop a child-centred understanding of play, through a systematic investigation of how children conceptualise play in direct consultation with the players themselves. Two research questions underpinned this study: (1) how do children understand and conceptualise play? And (2) how do these findings relate to established theories of play? Answers to both questions will help to identify essential characteristics of play, with the objective of making implementable recommendations for supporting play across multiple contexts and with the objective of informing future empirical studies on play.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The current study employed a qualitative research methodology using focus groups and a range of associated participatory methods to examine children's conceptualisations of play. This study is part of a larger project investigating a child-centred and strengths-based understanding of autistic play (see link https://osf.io/mj27s/).

Sampling, Recruitment and Participants

A summary of participant demographic information is presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Children were recruited through their school settings: schools were purposively selected with specific eligibility criteria including: 1) co-educational settings involving the full continuum of classes catering for children from 4-13 years; 2) a minimum of three Autism classes, as identified in the Department of Education and Skills Directory (DES) (2022) (to allow for further in-depth consultations with autistic learners as part of the wider study) and; 3) a diverse range of children including autistic children, children from a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, as reported informally by school management . Schools were recruited via the DES directory (2022) and researchers' networks and invited to participate in the consultation process.

Following parent consent and children's assent, a total of 68 children (30 male; 38 female) between the ages of 4 and 13 years participated in the research across 13 consultation groups. Based on teachers' reports of classroom demographics, participants included a minimum of 22 children with additional needs including children with EAL (n=4) and neurodivergent learners (Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia) (n=8). Teachers also indicated further children with additional needs with unconfirmed diagnoses or who were awaiting diagnoses (n=10). Each group comprised of four to six children, the design of which was informed by consultations with class teachers, in line with recommended practice (Lundy, McEvoy & Byrne, 2011).

Data Collection

A series of 46 consultation sessions based on a minimum of three sessions across 13 focus groups were conducted by the first author, an experienced primary school teacher between March and June 2023. Sessions ranged from 11 minutes to 55 minutes and were recorded for accuracy following parent consent and children's assent.

The interview questions followed a semi-structured format, and a multimethod approach was employed throughout. Given that 'not one single method [..] fits all children and all circumstances' (Dockett et al., 2012; p.207), flexibility was maintained in eliciting views, adapting to children's interests and desired methods of communication as well as seeking direct input from children themselves and their teachers in relation to preferred communication styles and methods (Holmes, 2019). Therefore, consultation sessions involved a toolkit of accessible and engaging participatory methods e.g. teddies or puppets, draw and tell approaches, adapted pots and beans exercise, sort and rank activities and photo elicitation (see link https://osf.io/mj27s/). These methods had been piloted in previous consultations with children and adapted following their feedback on the process (https://osf.io/3y28g/).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the authors' institution on September 22nd, 2022. However, ethical considerations extended beyond procedural ethics to ethics in practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) during the implementation of research. Informed assent was sought using an interactive assent booklet in the form of a PowerPoint presentation which have been used in similar research (e.g. Pyle & Danniels, 2016; O'Farrelly & Tatlow-Golden, 2022) and follows best practice recommendations in providing a meaningful level of information (O'Farrelly & Tatlow-Golden, 2022) to allow children to reach an informed decision regarding the nature of the study and objectives, what participation involves and how anonymity and confidentiality will be assured (see link https://osf.io/mj27s/). However, assent was ongoing and continually negotiated throughout the research process (Flewitt, 2005) and was recorded before each consultation session. Researchers were also acutely aware of children's vulnerability to unequal power relations and attempted to offset power relations by developing a safe and inclusive space, gaining trust and rapport with children (Lundy, 2007) through the use of introductory 'ice breaker' activities and consulting

with children in groups with classroom peers which offered a more supportive and less threatening environment in contributing their views (Bloom et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

Children's consultation sessions were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) via NVivo software (Lumivero, 2023). Each group's collective sessions were initially coded by the first author using semantic and latent codes. Analysis was largely inductive and construction of themes was primarily driven by the data themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in response to a pre-determined research question namely: how do children understand and conceptualise play? Preliminary themes were actively generated following identification of codes, which were subsequently reorganised and finalised using thematic mapping. This process involved close consultation and in-depth critical discussions between both authors to enhance richness and meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). However, reflexive thematic analysis is a deeply interpretive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and demands 'theoretically informed arguments as to how the data addresses the research question(s)' (Byrne, 2021, p.1407). Therefore, to answer our second research question, how do children's conceptualisations of play relate to established theories of play, the themes were interpreted through the lens of key theories. In this phase of analysis, we consulted Naeem et al.'s (2023) six-step process of thematic analysis: stage six prescribes the development of a conceptual model grounded in existing theories to 'encapsulate the study's findings' whilst simultaneously serving as 'justification for the theoretical contribution of the study' (Naeem et al., 2023, p.14). This phase is of particular importance given the highly theoretical and conceptual nature of the current study.

Results

Themes

Thirteen descriptive themes were constructed based on children's explicit accounts of what play is, as outlined in Table 2: 1) fun; 2) social; 3) creative and imaginative; 4) physically active; 5) context-dependent; 6) a fundamental childhood experience and; involving 7) happiness and pleasure; 8) toys and materials; 9) games; 10) degree of autonomy and agency; 11) outdoors and nature; 12) competition and challenge and; 13) level of adult involvement.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

[Insert Table 2 here]

Key Concepts

Interpreting the themes through an iterative process of critical reflection on relations between themes and to existing theories (Naeem et al., 2023), three key concepts were identified: (1) play as a source of meaningful (often social) connection; (2) play as requiring children to exert agency and; 3) play as a source of challenge and complexity. Most importantly, fun and pleasure seemed to be associated with these core elements within play. In this sense, these fundamental concepts of play reflected an innate drive for sustaining play as an intrinsically motivating experience.

Children referenced diverse characteristics to describe play, as illustrated in Table 2. For example, children described play in relation to the use of toys or materials, games, the outdoors and in terms of the level of physical activity. However, the presence of these features alone did not define play. Rather, these characteristics enhanced play for children provided each of the core fundamentals were satisfied i.e. degree of agency, meaningful connection, a desire for challenge and complexity alongside, overarching fun and pleasure. For example, in describing creativity and imagination during play, children referenced experiencing complexity and challenge, social connections, agency and associated fun and pleasure. Similarly, in describing play and the outdoors, children strongly emphasised the agency afforded, associated social connection and sense of fun during these play experiences.

The play experience was also influenced by external factors outside of the players' control (e.g. rules imposed by the players, the play environment). In all examples that the children discussed, play was sustained provided the core fundamentals of having a degree of autonomy, challenge and complexity and meaningful connection were present to a greater or lesser extent with a clear overarching requirement for fun and pleasure. In this sense, not only did the play experience involve the interplay between fundamental qualities necessary for play but also a level of negotiation on behalf of the player in navigating external conditions and the demands of social and structural factors oftentimes outside of the player's control.

Fundamentals of Play Based on Children's Perspectives

Play was depicted as a dynamic process in which meaningful connections (with others or with the child themselves), a degree of autonomy as well as challenge were evident with a clear requirement for the experience to be fun or pleasurable. These qualities were fundamental in sustaining play for children and were core features that could not be compromised in order for play to take place.

Although all necessary for play, none of these features in isolation were sufficient for play. Instead, children emphasised the sense of negotiation or interplay between these core qualities and external conditions such as play partners, materials and toys, cultural 'norms' and rules.

[Insert Figure 2]

Discussion

This study offers important theoretical contributions in strengthening our understanding of play, from the perspectives of the players themselves, in a field where play has largely been conceptualised 'through the discourse and perspectives of adults' (Nicholson et al., 2014, p.137). Although many themes were evident in children's representations of play (see Table 2), these were underpinned by three core features required for play, including a fundamental need for agency, meaningful connection (with others or with the child themselves), challenge and an overarching requirement for fun and pleasure in defining play.

These core qualities of play are not new concepts in theories of play. Rather, they reaffirm characteristics proposed by many theorists in defining play that have endured throughout the literature for decades (e.g. Bundy et al., 2001; Parten, 1932; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). This synergy was previously noted by the late David Whitebread (2018) in his overview of play research: 'powerful theoretical insights from theorists and researchers in the early parts of the twentieth century are being revisited, reaffirmed and built upon' (p.241).

For children, these fundamental qualities captured play as a deeply 'inward' (Howard, 2019, p.218) process, in line with previous research (Bundy

et al., 2001; Eberle, 2014; Henricks, 2015). In this sense, children defined play as an intrinsically motivating experience, not driven by an external goal but rather driven by the fulfilment of fundamental needs for meaningful connection, agency and challenge and complexity through play. This view closely aligns with Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory in which they propose that intrinsic motivation requires the satisfaction of basic psychological needs of competence (during challenges), relatedness, and autonomy, all of which were evident in our model of children's play and in the wider play literature. In our model of play, however, we describe how the presence of these core features allows a sense of fun and pleasure to arise from the interplay between these fundamental elements, as defined by children. Similar to Mukherjee's et al. (2023) model of children's conceptions of play in which a:

> Joyful state of mind seems to stand on or emerge from the joint presence of sense of safety, sense of agency and the feeling the activity being carried out is an end in itself……enjoyment emerges when the other three qualities of playfulness coalesce. (p.125)

The sense of negotiation within play, as described by children in this study echoes Vygotsky's (1978) notion of restraint within imaginative play in response to sociocultural rules and norms. This is also similar to Garvey's (1973) focus on the transactional nature of social play and to Eberle's (2014) emphasis on the contextual nature of play. Ryan and Deci's (2000) Cognitive Evaluation Theory is also very relevant here in highlighting that social and environmental conditions can contribute to varying levels of intrinsic motivation given that this is a core feature of play among children in this study and in the wider literature on play.

Thus, findings contradict the notion of static or fixed characteristics in play and instead, capture fluidity in play according to these key qualities. Although ever-present in play, these core features vary in their intensity as part of a dynamic and ever-evolving process in response to external and internal factors. Identifying features in this way may offer a more inclusive understanding of play, 'minimising the possibility of straightjacketing' play (Howard, 2002, p.490) by recognising its complexity and nuance and providing 'cohesion among seemingly contradictory views of play' (Zosh et al., 2018, p.2).

Implications

Informed by an empirical investigation of children's conceptualisations, our research sought to identify 'key ingredients of what it means to play' (Henricks, 2015, p.19) from the players themselves. In this sense, our findings extend beyond descriptive characteristics of play in identifying 'critical features of play' (Zosh et al., 2018, p.2) or 'unvarying dependable attributes of play' (Eberle, 2014, p.215).

Throughout this research, children emphasised the value of play as a fundamental childhood experience. We must continue to prioritise play as central to the lives of children and secure its fundamental position and address 'the overarching challenge of securing the status of play in early childhood education by increasing knowledge and understanding' (Howard, 2019, p.213). This is especially important given wider concerns surrounding the decline of play within society (Nicholson et al., 2014; Whitebread et al., 2012). Understanding how children view and experience play in childhood is an important part of defining and conceptualising play which in turn is fundamental to rigorous research on the role and function of play in children's lives (Howard, 2019; Zhao et al., 2019): 'in defining and framing play, we can see a pathway from understanding what play is, to what play does, to what outcomes play produces' (Wood & Chesworth, 2021, p.8). Thus, our findings offer important implications for developing meaningful programmes of research and practice by highlighting core qualities of play, as conceptualised by children. We need an operational definition of play, informed by the players themselves in order to support rigorous play research (Zhao et al., 2019) and formulation of meaningful hypotheses and assumptions on play. Ascertaining a universal understanding of play can unite cross-disciplinary research and evolve the field (Miller, 2017). Our findings thus also offer important implications for the future empirical investigation and measurement of play in terms of how we design research to best capture the players' perspectives (Johnson & Ip Dong, 2019) and validate longstanding concerns surrounding how best to capture the authenticity of play (Takhvar, 1988) and, in particular, qualities that 'may not be immediately visible or accessible' to the researcher (Wood, 2013 p.10)

Our findings also support the development of play-based curricula and policies by proposing core components which must be present for authentic play experiences: 'if play is to be purposeful, then whose purposes are privileged, and what purposes are being served: those of the child, the practitioners or the

curriculum (Wood, 2009, p.32). This is especially important given reported challenges for educators in translating knowledge and research to practice (Wood, 2013) and in light of direct consultations with educators and reported ambiguity surrounding how to use play pedagogies in the classroom despite an overwhelming endorsement of play in school contexts (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021; 2022).

Children's emphasis on the process of play as a fundamental experience driven by intrinsic motivation also aligns with the sense of absorption or immersion in play and Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of optimal experience and flow, as noted by Whitebread (2018). This warrants future investigation given reported links between flow and wellbeing (Howard & McInnes, 2013) and, indeed, flow and learning (Shernoff, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Educational researchers need a theory-informed and operationalizable definition of play to investigate relations between providing authentic play experiences in the classroom and learning: it may be that the 'flow' that arises in authentic play is a key requisite for learning and development of young children. This builds on Wood's (2013) important observations that:

> There remains a general mistrust of play in educational contexts which arise from two sources: the lack of a precise operational definition of play and the persistent view that play is the opposite of work. Therefore, play is less likely to produce either tangible evidence of learning or the learning outcomes that are valued by parents and politicians. (p.42)

Limitations

This research offers important theoretical contributions regarding children's conceptualisations of play, an understanding which is integral to undertaking rigorous play research. However, there are some limitations to this study. Firstly, findings reflect the views of a predominately white neurotypical sample of children across two educational contexts within the Republic of Ireland and, therefore, may not reflect the views of all children. Future research is warranted with diverse populations and in particular underrepresented groups such as children from socially marginalised communities or more ethnically diverse groups. Children were consulted regarding their views on play within educational contexts which may have influenced their perspectives. However, children differentiated their views on play, referencing varying environments such as the home, classroom, and the yard.

Conclusion

This research offers important insight into children's perspectives of play and rigorously reaffirms key concepts in understanding play that have persisted in the literature for decades. Our findings, interpreted in the context of the wider literature on play, suggest that for play to be truly facilitated in the classroom it must have connection, challenge and choice for children, and thus provides an important blueprint for researchers interested in investigating the relationship between play and learning.

In conceptualising play, children demonstrated close synergy and 'continuity of ideas' (Whitebread, 2018, p.241) with key theorists. This study also reaffirmed the role of the player in conceptualising play and addressed limitations of most play research which is from an 'adult frame of reference' (Howard, 2019, p.211). This systematic investigation and interpretation of children's perspectives on play reinforces children's fundamental right to play (UNCRC, 1989) and the unique importance of play in children's lives.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Appendices

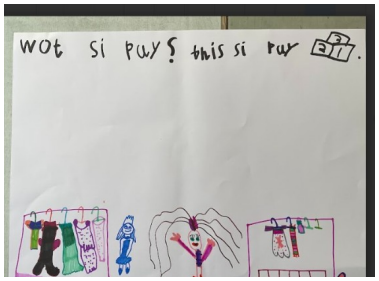
Figure Captions

Figure 1.

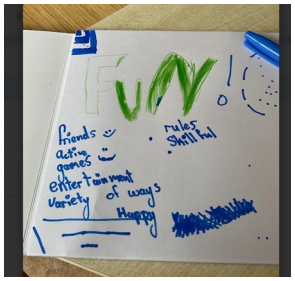
Key Recommendations for Understanding Play, as Reported by Children

Figure 2.

Fundamentals of Play Based on Children's Perspectives

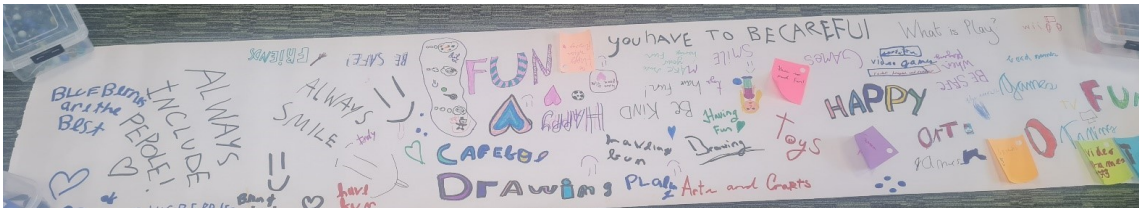


Banana Head Group (6-6 years)



Waffles Group (11-13 years)

Super Group (4-4 years)



Blueberries Group (9-11 years)

Figure 1.

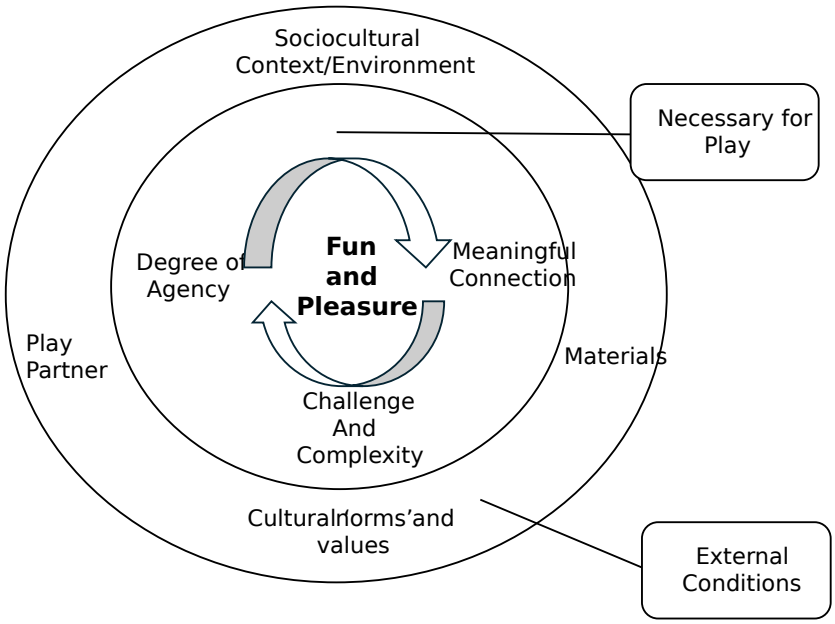


Figure 2.

Tables with captions

Table 1.

Characteristics of the Study Sample (n=68)

School Number	Context	Total Number of Participants	Participant Age Range	Participant Sex
School 1	Urban	n=41	4-6 years (n=17) 9-11 years (n=24)	Male (n=18) Female (n=23)
School 2	Rural	n=27	6-8 years (n=14) 12-13 years (n=13)	Male (n=12) Female (n=15)

Table 2.

Key Themes for Understanding Play, as Conceptualised by Children

Theme (Sub-themes)	Sample Quotations
Fun	'it has to be fun' (Annie, 6-8 years) 'And then having fun because I don't know that's just a part of play I suppose' (Katie,12-13 years)
Happiness and Pleasure	it makes us happy' (Rory, 4-6 years)
Social	'I love my friends in play' (Riley, 4-6 years) 'the things that make it fun are other people basically..but it's sometimes nice to be by yourself. Then it's also good to socialise. I feel like you don't notice it, but it makes it just more enjoyable for your body and your mind' (Amelia, 9-11 years)
Creative and Imaginative	'because like when you're playing you need to be creative like about like what you could do or play' (Helena, 12-13 years) 'imagination, creation..and that's really all I know what makes play really fun' (Jude, 9-11 years)
Physically Active	'I think anything that's active is play' (Freddie, 6-8 years)
Context-dependent (*Mood, Weather; Location; Play Partners; Toys and Materials; Age*)	***Mood*** 'well sometimes it depends on what mood you're in' (Henrietta, 9-11 years) ***Weather*** 'but like if it's raining outside you might like do a game inside' (Archie, 12-13 years) ***Location*** 'well there's kind of rules in my classroom…outdoors we are free to do anything we like' (Henry, 6-8 years)

	Play Partner 'I think you need to care for the other people. You can't play something too rough and then them like being younger than you and you being older' (Audrey, 9-11 years)
	Toys and Materials 'if you have the right toy to play with you play a lot longer' (Lucas, 9-11 years)
	Age 'different like things according to like your age, or like what you like doing. So like, if you were like two and you were like 10 they'd be like you'd like different things' (Helena, 12-13 years)
Fundamental Childhood Experience	'well like like playing when you're younger especially it's like it's one of your main things in life like because if you don't like do as many jobs or like stuff' (Helena, 12-13 years)
Toys and Materials	'we play a lot with toys' (Rory, 4-6 years)
Games	'you can play lots of games' (Elsa, 6-8 years)
Degree of Autonomy and Agency **(*Mutual Autonomy and Agency; Rules*)**	'you can play anything you want' (Myles, 6-8 years) ***Mutual Autonomy and Agency*** you don't want to be like trying to get your friends to do stuff like they don't want to' (Emilia, 12-13 years) ***Rules*** you can do whatever you want..except safety stuff' (Sophia, 6-8 years) 'we have to share, take turns and nooooooooo hitting' (Elsa, 6-8 years)
Outdoors and Nature	'I like smelling the flowers' (Cassie, 6-8 years) 'Outdoors we are free to do anything we like' (Henry, 6-8 years)

Competition and Challenge	'It makes it even more fun when there's a challenge to it because it's like eh..it's more competitive' (Lorcan, 12-13 years).
Level of Adult Involvement (*Co-player; Control and Curtailing; Monitoring; Help and Support; Planning; Uninvolved*)	***Co-Player*** 'I like.. so like playing with my parents' (Parker, 4-6 years) ***Control and Curtailing*** 'you have to get permission from your parents' (Leonard, 9-11 years) ***Monitoring*** 'cause grownups probably doesn't really like play, they probably like watching their kids to see if their kids are okay' (Elsa, 6-8 years) ***Help and Support*** 'they can help you learn more about the game' (Hazel, 9-11 years) ***Planning*** 'they (adults) don't really play they kind of like set up the play maybe' (Evie, 12-12 years) ***Uninvolved*** 'I don't really play with my parents because they don't have enough time so I just play with my brother' (Olive, 9-11 years)