A Strengths-Based Understanding of the Play of Autistic Children

Abstract

Play is a central feature of childhood and a fundamental right of all children. Currently, our understanding of autistic play is based on a deficit perspective, most often framed in comparison to neurotypical “norms” and assumptions where the views of the players themselves have been overlooked. In moving towards a strengths-based neuroaffirmative understanding of autistic play, this study consulted with 19 autistic children (aged 5-13 years) using a series of semi-structured interviews and a range of creative and participatory methods. Reflexive thematic analysis generated eight themes where children conceptualised play as involving: 1) toys and materials; 2) creativity and imagination; 3) social connection; 4) outdoors and nature; 5) sensory stimulation; 6) physical activity; 7) autonomy and agency and; 8) affective, inward dimensions. These findings challenge longstanding deficit-oriented assumptions that have persisted throughout the literature for decades and have implications for future programmes of research, theory and practice, in particular on the importance of providing and facilitating authentic play experiences for autistic children in education and care contexts.

Lay Abstract

Autistic play is generally described from a deficit perspective where the players themselves have been overlooked. It is important to consult autistic children themselves about their understanding of play. We asked autistic children about their views on play using many different creative ways that were chosen by the children themselves. We analysed findings using reflexive thematic analysis. Autistic children in this research described play as involving toys and materials, creativity and imagination, other people, the outdoors and nature, sensory experiences, movement, autonomy and agency, alongside feelings and emotions of pleasure and joy. It is very important that we ask the players themselves what they think about play rather than relying on deficit framed, non-autistic definitions of autistic play. In this paper, we will discuss how these findings will help develop future research, theory and practice in respecting children’s right to authentic play experiences.

Keywords

Play, Autism, Participatory Research, Neurodiversity, Autistic Perspectives

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Introduction

Play is a fundamental feature of childhood and widely recognised as essential to children's wellbeing, overall quality of life, and learning and development (Howard, 2019; Whitebread et al., 2012; Wood, 2013). Play is also a right in and of itself (UNCRC, 1989). However, defining play has proved challenging for researchers over the years with much contention dominating the field in ascertaining a universal understanding of play. Traditionally, play has been conceptualised according to observable characteristics and behaviours (e.g. Krasnor & Pepler, 1980), categories or types (e.g. physical play, symbolic play or games with rules) (Piaget, 1962; Whitebread et al., 2017), level of social interaction (e.g. Parten, 1932; Vygotsky, 1978), level of adult involvement (e.g. Weisberg et al., 2016) and most recently, according to dispositional or inward qualities of the player (Bundy et al., 2001).

Despite the lack of consensus surrounding our understanding of play, there is surprising consistency across research in viewing autistic play from a deficit perspective, most often in comparison to neurotypical "norms" and assumptions (Pritchard-Rowe et al. 2024; Wolfberg & Woods, 2023). Autistic play has been described as 'abnormal' (Jarrold, Boucher & Smith, 1993, p.295), 'impoverished' (Riguet et al., 1982, p.440), 'inappropriate' (Sigman et al., 1999, p.75), 'deficient or disordered' (Conn, 2015, p.1193) and pathologized as something 'lacking' (Theodorou & Nind, 2010, p.102) or 'to be "fixed" or normalised' (Pritchard-Rowe et al. 2024 p.3) in order to 'better align with more 'typical' play characteristics' (Morris et al., 2024, p.12). This view is also found in Autism diagnostic criteria (DSM-V) where 'deficits' in play are regarded as a defining feature of Autism (APA, 2013). Indeed, Conn (2015) has noted that play

is widely used ‘in the construction of disability where they (children) can be judged as incompetent, unskilful and ‘not typical’ as players’ (p.1193).

This deficit focused view has very much centred on describing autistic play in terms of observable categories or ‘based on non-autistic interpretation of observable autistic behaviours’ (Pritchard-Rowe et al., 2024, p.2). For example, “deficits” have often been reported in imaginative play (Hobson, Lee & Hobson, 2008; Wing et al., 1977) and social play (Wolfberg & Woods, 2023; Kossyvaki & Papoudi, 2016; Restall & MacGill Evans, 1994) including autistic children’s reported preferences for solitary play (Holmes & Willoughby, 2005).

Recently, however, researchers have proposed a ‘distinctive autistic play culture’ (Conn, 2015, p.1194) with calls for the consideration of the ‘unique strengths or potential diversity of play experiences for autistic individuals’ (Morris et al., 2024, p.12) as opposed to comparisons to non-autistic norms (Conn & Drew, 2017). Instead, researchers have described unique features of autistic play according to engagement with sensory and physical materials (Conn, 2015; Fahy, Delicâte & Lynch, 2021; Wolfberg & Woods, 2023) and repetitive play behaviours (Lantz, Nelson & Loftin, 2004; Williams, Reddy & Costall, 2001). For example, Eisele and Howard (2012) examined ritualised or repetitive behaviours as play behaviours and found many commonalties between characteristics of playful engagement and repetitive behaviours such as a sense of fun and pleasure, active engagement, challenge and risk, and persistence. These findings reaffirm Gibson and McNally’s (2024) conclusions that ‘play activities that may appear ‘purposeless’ to non-autistic adult observers often have a meaning to the player and may fulfil important self-regulation needs’.

In investigating autistic play, research has especially overlooked the internal and dispositional qualities which are regarded as fundamental to play (Fahy, Delicâte & Lynch, 2021; Kasari, Chang & Patterson, 2013; Luckett, Bundy & Rogers, 2007), neglecting to examine ‘the child’s playfulness and perspective in play’ (Conn, 2015, p.1193). This is especially concerning given the notable importance of ‘inward’ characteristics of play such as intrinsic motivation and a sense of pleasure (Bundy et al., 2011; O’Keeffe & McNally, 2024)

Therefore, our current understanding of autistic play is predominantly based on outward observations using neurotypical frames of reference where the autistic players' perspectives have been overlooked: 'as well as focusing on "deficits" then, understanding of autistic play have tended to neglect autistic perspectives' (Pritchard-Rowe et al., 2024, p.2). We need a clear understanding of autistic play, informed by the players themselves in 'revealing purpose, form and meaning in relation to play (Conn, 2015, p.1193). Exploring these inward and dispositional qualities of autistic play is further compounded by a narrative that autistic children lack motivation or drive to spontaneously engage in and sustain play experiences (Lantz, Nelson & Loftin, 2004); Eisele and Howard (2012) express significant concern surrounding this recurring narrative as to whether 'autistic children play' (p.58).

Amidst increasing calls to consult with the players themselves and in keeping with the wider neurodiversity paradigm, we need an understanding of autistic play from the players themselves in moving beyond deficit-oriented, non-autistic framed descriptions that continue to dominate the literature (Conn, 2015; Pritchard-Rowe et al., 20024). This will also help overcome gaps in understanding 'what constitutes authentic play (and) validate what is meaningful for the players' (Wolfberg & Woods 2023, p.219).

Recently, Pritchard-Rowe et al. (2024) interviewed 22 autistic adults (aged 18-57 years) regarding their perspectives on play and how their experiences differ from non-autistic play. Participants described engagement in imaginative play and experiences of flow in play. Furthermore, they valued both social connections in play and sought solitary play for recuperation and oftentimes choice depending on internal factors (e.g. tiredness, mood). These findings challenge several deficit-based assumptions of autistic play within the literature (i.e. play as solitary, lack of symbolic or imaginative play). Similarly, Conn (2015) focused on autistic adults' autobiographical accounts of play and friendship across published literature and highlighted preferences for sensory based activities, nature, imagination, and social connection, again contradicting several preconceived notions of autistic play (i.e. play as solitary, lack of imaginative play). Other researchers have sought autistic children's play preferences. For example, Fahy and colleagues (2021) asked five children (aged 6 to 9 years) about their play preferences and noted how children's views varied across different contexts and included preferences for imaginative and group

games, sense of challenge alongside observations of flow, as conceptualised by Csikzentmihayli (1990) regarding a state of immersion or absorption within play. Other researchers have focused on understanding autistic individuals' perspectives in relation to specific components of play. For example, Pavlopoulou, Usher and Pearson (2022) interviewed 12 autistic adolescent boys (aged 13 to 15 years) regarding their perspectives of online gaming and their motivations. Participants emphasised the sense of agency in play and valued online play as a source of social connection, creativity, emotional regulation (i.e. escapism) alongside experiences of flow.

This literature addresses important gaps in challenging longstanding deficit-based norms and assumptions surrounding autistic play. However, the current evidence base predominantly reflects the views of autistic adults with the views of children and, non-speaking autistic people significantly overlooked (Hancock, 2020; Papoudi & Kossyvaki, 2018).

The Current Study

Developing our understanding of autistic play is fundamental if we are to capitalise on the potential of play to support all children's quality of life and wellbeing (Pritchard-Rowe et al., 2024; Wolfberg et al., 2015; Wolfberg & Woods, 2023). This is especially important given reports of poorer mental health outcomes among autistic people (Benevides et al., 2020; Crane et al., 2019) and associated stigma for autistic people surrounding a deficit-oriented view of autistic play (Pritchard-Rowe et al., 2024).

A large volume of research is dedicated towards supporting autistic children to play in order to access associated developmental benefits (e.g. see Kent et al., 2021 for review of play-based interventions). However, we first need to understand autistic play in order to systematically investigate any relationship between play and learning and development for autistic children. Understanding how autistic children view play is essential in meaningfully 'cocreating play spaces and play activities with children' (Danniels & Pyle, 2023, p.1173) in ways that truly reflect authentic play experiences and respect 'the right of all children to play in ways that they prefer' (Gibson & McNally, 2024). This is especially important given ambiguity among educators surrounding how best to support inclusion in play (Danniels & Pyle, 2024). Developing a neuroaffirmative understanding of play will also inform diagnostic

criteria in response to calls by Pritchard-Rowe et al. (2024) surrounding a shift away from a deficit focused frame of play, as identified in their consultations with autistic adults, towards a strengths-based perspective of play across diagnostic assessments.

This study therefore aimed to develop a child-centred, strengths-based understanding of autistic play, through a systematic investigation of how autistic children conceptualise play. The study was guided by one research question: how do autistic children understand and conceptualise play? This study is part of a larger project investigating a child-centred understanding of play (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2024).

Methods

Participants

Two primary schools in the Republic of Ireland were recruited through convenience sampling and were purposively selected using the following eligibility criteria: 1) co-educational settings involving the full continuum of classes catering for children from 4-13 years and; 2) a minimum of three Autism classes, as identified in Department of Education and Skills Directory (2022) to allow for consultations with a diverse range of autistic learners.

A sample of 20 participants (12 boys; 8 girls) were recruited through their school contexts. Following parent consent and children's assent, a total of 19 children (11 boys; 8 girls) between the ages of 5 and 12 years participated in the research. A summary of participant demographic information is presented in Table 1. Data was not collected on socioeconomic status or educational attainment levels. The majority of participants were white-Irish with some children of African and Asian heritage. The only criterion for participation was that the child had received a formal diagnosis of Autism. No other eligibility criteria were used in the selection of participants for this research. This is especially important given that children with co-occurring needs and younger children are often overlooked in participatory research (Lundy, 2007).

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Sex	School Context

Pseudonym	Range (Years)		
Kian	5-6 years	Male	Autism Class (Urban)
Kayden	5-6 years	Male	Autism Class (Urban)
Holly	5-6 years	Female	Autism Class (Urban)
Lisa	5-6 years	Female	Autism Class (Urban)
Zara	8-9 years	Female	Autism Class (Urban)
Bob	8-9 years	Male	Autism Class (Urban)
Deirdre	10-11 years	Female	Autism Class (Urban)
Jay	10-11 years	Male	Autism Class (Urban)
Joshua	10-11 years	Male	Autism Class (Urban)
Raven	12-13 years	Female	Mainstream Class (Rural)
Sandra	8 years	Female	Autism Class (Rural)
Charlotte	11 years	Female	Autism Class (Rural)
Kara	7 years	Female	Autism Class (Rural)
Eric	6 years	Male	Autism Class (Rural)
Josh	8 years	Male	Autism Class (Rural)
Sumlu	10-12 years	Male	Autism Class (Rural)
Lizzie	10-12 years	Male	Autism Class (Rural)
Andy	10-12 years	Male	Autism Class (Rural)
Donal	10-12 years	Male	Autism Class (Rural)

Data Collection

A series of 62 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author, an experienced primary school teacher, between March and June 2023. Each learner engaged in a minimum of three consultation sessions and sessions were recorded for accuracy with parent consent and children's assent. The length of interviews varied from a minimum of five minutes to a maximum of 1 hour with an average duration of 25 minutes.

Multiple creative and participatory-based methods were used to elicit children's perspectives on play e.g. teddies and puppets, draw and tell approaches, book making, walking tours, adapted pots and beans exercise, sort and rank activities and photo elicitation. (See link for detailed protocols and procedures-removed for peer review). These methods had been piloted and subsequently adapted as part of previous consultations with neurotypical and neurodivergent children by the authors (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2024). Children also selected between individual, or group interviews with autistic peers based on their preferences and prior consultations with teachers (Lundy et al., 2011). Interviews were tailored to each participant's strengths, interests and individual

communication style (Blaisdell et al., 2019) in order to facilitate all children to express their views in an accessible, comfortable and engaging manner and ensure opportunities for autonomy and agency regarding the selection of methods, as recommended in previous consultations with children (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2024). This was especially important given that we were consulting with young children and children with additional needs who are 'the least likely to be given the opportunity to express their views about matters which are important to them' (Lundy, 2007, p.935). The researcher also adopted flexible questioning throughout in terms of reformulating and re-asking questions to ensure understanding as well as providing sufficient waiting time for participants.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted from the Research Ethics Committee at the authors' institution on September 22nd, 2022. However, ethical considerations extended beyond procedural ethics to ethics of care (Heath et al., 2007) throughout our consultations with children. Informed assent was recorded before each interview using an interactive assent book (as used in previous research e.g. O'Farrelly & Tatlow-Golden, 2022; Pyle & Danniels, 2016) to enable children to make an informed decision surrounding the purpose of this research and what their participation entailed (https://osf.io/mj27s/). However, assent was ongoing and continually negotiated as part of a relational process (Arnott et al., 2020; Dockett & Perry, 2010). Researchers were also vigilant to both verbal and non-verbal indicators of assent or dissent alongside signs of discomfort and engagement (Cocks, 2006; Gallagher et al., 2010).

Researchers also remained conscious of unequal power relations and attempted to offset this dynamic through developing trust and rapport with children (Spryou, 2011) and consulting with children within a familiar, safe and inclusive space (Lundy, 2007) to help them to feel comfortable in expressing their views (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). Throughout each session, children were reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation in terms of their right to withdraw from the research, in addition to opting out of specific activities as well as providing opportunities to rehearse this process for example, through the use of a stop/pass card as well as a physical speaking object which can be 'passed'.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) via NVivo software (Lumivero, 2023). Analysis was primarily inductive and centred on the construction of themes driven by the data themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in response to the research question: how do autistic children conceptualise play? However, analysis was also deductive whereby existing research provided a further lens through which data were analysed and interpreted (Braun & Clare, 2020). Preliminary themes were actively generated following identification of semantic and latent codes, which were subsequently reorganised and finalised using thematic mapping. This process involved in-depth consultation and critical dialogue and reflection between both authors to enhance richness and meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019; King et al., 2019)

Community Involvement Statement

Prior consultations with neurotypical and neurodivergent learners by the authors validated the worthwhile nature of this research and were used to inform the design of the interview guide and associated methods and materials (https://osf.io/mj27s/). Informal conversations were also conducted with educators of the participants on how best to facilitate children's expression of views and development of rapport (e.g. preferred models of communication, strengths, interests, sensory needs, proposed desired environment and format) to ensure interview sessions were comfortable and engaging for all participants. Educators were also provided with personalised digital social narratives (https://osf.io/mj27s/) outlining key information regarding the nature of the research, what participation entailed alongside researcher details to support children's understanding of the research, as recommended by Tesfaye et al. (2019). Educators were also asked to share this material with the parents of participants prior to the commencement of interviews.

This research was centred on the co-construction of knowledge with the autistic community in informing a strengths-based neuroaffirmative understanding of play from the perspectives of the players themselves. Participants were directly involved in the design of sessions, the format of which was child-led and adapted and amended based on individual preferences

to express and record their views. This included providing multiple opportunities to contribute throughout the day in whatever means children desired. The researcher also provided opportunities for member checking to summarise key points for children and in order to minimise the risk of 'adulteration' of the children's viewpoints (Flynn, 2013). Participation of all children was facilitated with careful planning around sensory breaks, use of wide range of engaging materials and careful attention to children's body language.

Results

As shown in Figure 1., eight themes were generated based on children's conceptualisations of play. Participant quotes which exemplify themes are reported using pseudonyms with some edits in relation to punctuation to facilitate reading.

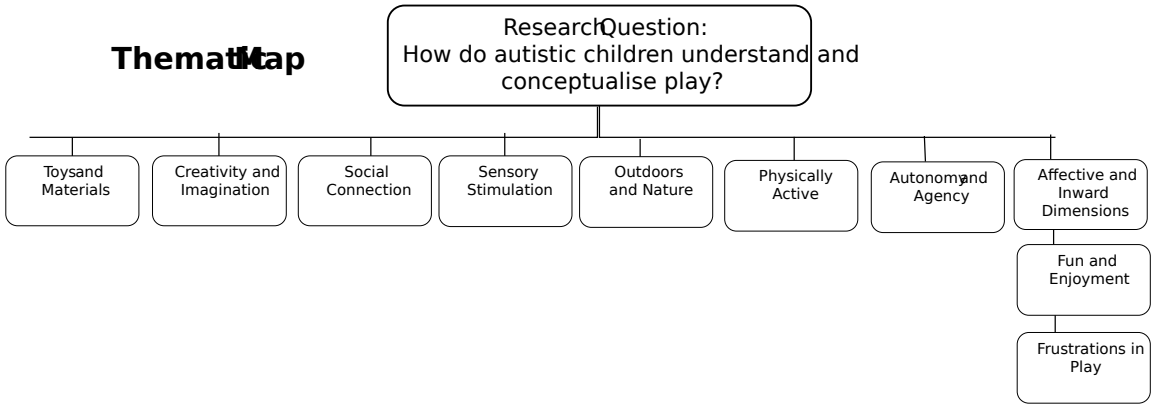

Figure 1.

Thematic Map

Theme 1: toys and materials

Engaging with toys and materials was a fundamental component of play for autistic children in this study. Children described playing with 'ball(s); (Kian, 5-6 years), 'blocks' (Holly, 5-6 years), 'teddies' (Kayden, 5-6 years), dolls and figurines such as 'Lego figures' (Bob, 8-9 years) and 'dolls house(s)' (Lisa, 5-6 years) alongside equipment such as the 'trampoline(s)' (Deirdre, 10-11 years) or 'swings' (Kayden, 5-6 years), wheeled toys such as a 'go kart' (Charlotte, 11 years) or 'riding my bike' (Kara, 7 years) and everyday objects such as, 'a

catalogue watch' (Zara, 8-9 years), 'boxes' (Eric, 6 years) and 'pen(s)' (Sumlu, 10-12 years).

Children also emphasised using digital materials in conceptualising play describing 'video games…and youtube' (Sandra, 8 years), 'watching TV' (Zara, 8-9 years) as well as opportunities for 'animation..I've a YouTube channel (Donal, 10-12 years); 'I really like working with technology..on biodiversity day I made a movie there' (Raven, 12-13 years). Others referenced play based on cartoons or movies such as 'My Little Pony' (Zara, 8-9 years), 'alpha blocks and number blocks' (Josh, 8 years) and 'Peppa (pig)' (Sandra, 8 years).

Many others also described 'play(ing) some games' (Zara, 8-9 years) including structured games like 'playing tag and cops and robbers' (Kara, 7 years), 'catching' (Kian, 5-6 years) and 'hopscotch' (Zara, 8-9 years) as well as 'playing board games' (Kara, 7 years) and sports where children referenced 'I adore football' (Andy, 10-12 years) alongside 'swimming and gymnastics' (Zara, 8-9 years).

Theme 2: creativity and imagination

Children referenced elements of creativity in play where 'I get to make things (with Lego)' (Bob, 8-9 years) and 'construction' (Josh, 8 years). Others described 'singing' (Deirdre, 10-11 years) or listening to music 'because it's kind of like vision(ing) stories in your head' (Joshua, 10-11 years) or 'making movies…listening to the different sound effects and working out the order that we put the videos in' (Raven, 12-13 years). Children also described 'play is drawing' (Kian, 5-6 years) with some children referencing associated agency where 'I can draw my own thing' (Bob, 8-9 years) and imagination where 'you can be creative and use your imagination with it' (Joshua, 10-11 years).

Further opportunities to 'get to use your imagination' (Joshua, 10-11 years) were referenced by many children such as 'pretend(ing) to be different characters' (Bob, 8-9 years), 'making a shop' (Kian, 5-6 years), 'play(ing) with babies…I like putting them down for a nap' (Zara, 8-9 years) or 'dress up' (Kara, 7 years). Many children described taking inspiration from digital content for example 'sometimes me and my sister after we watch them (movies) , we kind of play them out' (Joshua, 10-11 years), while another child referenced playing 'drama…usually (based) on a story' (Sumlu, 10-12 years).

Theme 3: social connection

Children emphasised social connections in play describing ‘all of us playing together’ (Charlotte, 11 years) and ‘everything is better with lots of people’ (Kara, 7 years). Children sought social connections with multiple play partners including adults (e.g. parents, grandparents, educators) where ‘I play with my Dad…it’s just fun’ (Donal, 10-12 years) while others sought more adult involvement in play ‘Mommy and Daddy do work and not play with me’ (Lisa, 5-6 years) and another child described the decreasing role of adults as coplayers as they matured; ‘you don’t really play with grownups as you get older because you play with people around your age more than people who are like 30 years older than you’ (Sumlu, 10-12 years). Children also described social connections in play with siblings, cousins and pets however, in particular emphasised connections with their friends and expressed ‘want(ing) to play with your friends or to make friends’ (Kayden, 5-6 years). Despite seeking social connections in play, some described pursuing connections with themselves in play where ‘sometimes I need alone time’ (Kara, 7 years). This appeared to serve a recuperative function for some children ‘to calm down’ (Kara, 7 years) as well as associated agency where ‘it’s a lot of fun when you’re playing by yourself..because you get to control the whole story’ (Donal, 10-12 years).

Theme 4: outdoors and nature

The outdoors was a fundamental component of play with children describing playing ‘in the garden’ (Kian, 5-6 years), ‘the yard’ (Josh, 8 years), ‘sensory garden’ (Bob, 8-9 years) or ‘playground (Sandra, 8 years). Some referenced ‘the space’ (Sumlu, 10-12 years) afforded outside and associated opportunities for social connection such as ‘playing in the yard with my friends’ (Joshua, 10-11 years). Children also referenced connections with nature in play describing ‘the nature trail’ (Raven, 12-13 years), ‘smelling (flowers)’ (Deirdre, 10-11 years) and connections with animals such as ‘saving woodlice…I’m a big fan’ (Jay, 10-11 years) or ‘looking at beetles’ (Sumlu, 10-12 years).

Theme 5: play as a source of sensory stimulation

Children described engagement with sensory materials in play referencing materials such as ‘water’ (Eric, 6 years) where ‘I like it shhhh (makes water sound)..cause I can touch it and it goes whooooo’ (Bob, 8-9 years).

Others described materials such as ‘playdough and sand’ (Lisa, 5-6 years) and getting to ‘mush it up’ (Kara, 7 years). One learner described sensory movements in play in relation to ‘this is also play (clicks pen)..it’s satisfying to click..because I like fiddling with things which are fun’ (Sumlu, 10-12 years).

Theme 6: physically active

Children highlighted the movement in play and described ‘do(ing) boxing’ (Kayden, 5-6 years), ‘climbing’ (Bob, 8-9 years), ‘bouncing (on the trampoline)’ (Deirdre, 10-11 years), ‘swing(ing)’ (Joshua, 10-11 years), ‘running around’ (Josh, 8 years) and ‘kicking the ball’ (Donal, 10-12 years). Some children emphasised rough play such as ‘wrestling with my friends on the trampoline’ (Donal, 10-12 years) or ‘doing stunts..I can throw myself off a wall like you know the yellow wall in the OT room..I can throw myself off that’ (Joshua, 10-11 years). However, some children also described play where ‘it doesn’t involve real activity like running around’ (Sumlu, 10-12 years) ‘such as ‘sitting on my bed..and snuggling my teddies..I feel calm’ (Kara, 7 years).

Theme 7: autonomy and agency

Children referenced the importance of autonomy and agency in play where ‘I can play whatever I want…or else play just isn’t play’ (Kara, 7 years). Some older children also talked about the need for negotiation and ‘compromise’ (Joshua, 10-11 years) in play with particular reference to social partners: ‘Like when I’m playing stuff with friends and then they play they want to play something which I don’t like but then they play stuff I like so it’s fun’ (Sumlu, 10-12 years). However, success in negotiating desired play within social contexts may not always occur in play where’ some people might have less success like me and Donal and Lizzie we’re not popular’ (Sumlu, 10-12 years. Children also referenced rules in play, oftentimes imposed by the players, in relation to safety such as ‘play(ing) nicely..let’s say if we’re playing and someone was being rough then it you might fall over and hurt yourself’ (Joshua, 10-11 years) and also social rules such as ‘sharing (with) your friends’ (Lisa) and ‘rule(s) for no being mean’ (Zara, 8-9 years) and ‘including people’ (Joshua, 10-11 years).

Theme 8: affective, inward dimensions of play

Subtheme 8.1. fun and enjoyment

Children emphasised the overriding sense of fun and enjoyment in play where ‘what matters is you’re having fun’ (Kara, 7 years) and ‘it has to be fun’ (Donal, 10-12 years). Children also described the overwhelming sense of happiness and pleasure in play where ‘it just makes people happy that’s all ‘(Kayden, 5-6 years) and‘people like playing cause it makes them happy’ (Bob, 8-9 years).

Some children referenced how play ‘might relieve stress’ (Joshua) and associated feelings of ‘calm’ (Zara, 8-9 years) and ‘relax(ation)’ during play experiences. Several children also referenced feeling ‘happy and excited’ (Joshua, 10-11 years) during play while others described the sense of absorption or ‘flow’ in play where ‘it keeps me distracted even though there have been times we’re supposed to do work and I would do that (clicking pen) for half an hour’ (Sumlu, 10-12 years) and where ‘ I feel like it’s (virtual reality) connected to me, like it’s making my heart run’ (Jay, 10-11 years).

Subtheme 3.2. frustrations in play

Although children overwhelmingly emphasised the positive affective qualities of play, some children referenced negative emotions such as sadness, ‘em when you’re sad’ (Kara, 7 years). For children, this often emerged from the desire for social connection in play where ‘sometimes on yard nobody plays with me’ (Kara, 7 years) or:

> ‘so let’s say if me and Jay were playing a game and you wanted to play and then Jay said no, but I said yes. And then if we both said no, you’d feel upset…and you’d probably be thinking oh did I, did I do something wrong.’ (Joshua, 10-11 years)

Some children referenced a sense of anger and frustration in play in particular during digital games where ‘I’m always raging..if I get into the bottom in *Fortnite*, I like, I always want to throw my controller like into the door and like, oh my god’ (Jay, 10-11 years) alongside associated self-regulation where ‘I get frustrated and them I’m just like, I need to calm down..so I take a time out for a few minutes…take a toilet break or something (Jay, 10-11 years). For some, this stemmed from a sense of overwhelming challenge where ‘I can’t complete the game…because it’s too hard’ (Sumlu, 10-12 years) or players not

following the rules where ‘some people who join my party (online) and they just kick me…until you get so angry that you don’t accept them anymore’ (Kayden, 5-6 years)

Discussion

In conceptualising play, children referenced a diverse range of dimensions including both observable aspects (e.g. engagement with toys and materials, outdoors and nature) and inward features of play such as feeling enjoyment, positive and negative affect as well as feelings of autonomy and agency. Children’s emphasis on the inward qualities of play is noteworthy given that our current understanding of autistic play is largely based on outward features of certain categories of play (i.e. solitary play and imaginative play) (Conn, 2015; Kasari, Chang & Patterson, 2013). This is an important finding that reinforces earlier calls to reassess how we view autistic play: ‘For a child to be described as playing, the dispositional features of play should apply regardless of the type of activity he or she is engaged in’ (Luckett, Bundy & Rogers, 2007, p.369).

In developing our understanding of play through direct consultations with the players themselves, this research challenges longstanding deficit-oriented assumptions that have persisted throughout the literature for decades. First, many children referenced the creative and imaginative nature of play. This is in direct contrast to reports of “deficits” in symbolic or imaginative play (e.g. Hobson, Lee & Hobson 2008; Wing et al., 1977) but in keeping with the reports of autistic adults and adolescents (Conn 2015; Fahy et al. 2021; Pavlopoulou, Usher & Pearson 2022). Second, many children described seeking social connections in play which again contrasts with dominant views in the literature (e.g. Restall & MacGill-Evans, 1993) although several children did highlight the desire for solitary play here also. Importantly, some children emphasised the recuperative function of ‘alone time’ in play, as identified by Pritchard-Rowe et al. (2024) alongside associated feelings of freedom within solitary play. Third, children emphasised an intrinsic drive to play and enduring sense of fun and pleasure which again challenges accounts where ‘the autistic child is rarely depicted as playful’ (Eisele & Howard, 2012, p.139).

Our findings also align with findings emerging from the autistic community based on adult retrospective accounts of play and the idea of a unique autistic play culture previously dismissed in favour of neurotypical

“norms” (Jordan, 2003; Wolfberg & Woods, 2023). For example, many children referenced sensory stimulating experiences in play similar to reports by autistic adults (Conn, 2015; Pritchard-Rowe et al. 2024), with some describing experiences of ‘flow’ and absorption in play (Csikzentmihayli, 1990). This is especially important given links of play to children’s wellbeing, as noted by Pritchard-Rowe et al. (2024) and what is often a key aim of educators, namely to facilitate play in educational contexts to support children’s development and wellbeing. This finding reaffirms calls to acknowledge autistic children’s differences in play and non-conventional play (Jordan, 2003).

In summary, these findings offer new insight into autistic children’s conceptualisations of play and reinforce the importance of ascertaining a strengths-based, neuroaffirmative understanding of play from the perspective of the players themselves. Indeed, Luckett and colleagues (2007) have cautioned that ‘some practitioners and researchers have lost sight of what play really is’ (Luckett, Bundy & Rogers, 2007, p.366) for autistic children.

Implications for Practice

Our findings support the development of play-based curricula, pedagogies and policies by outlining key features of play that are necessary for creating and facilitating playful conditions and environments that truly respect authentic play experiences and children’s right to play in meaningful and desirable ways (Gibson & McNally, 2024). This is important amidst criticism that educators ‘have failed to recognise the intrinsic value of play when planning programmes… and neglect quality play’ for autistic children (Theodorou & Nind, 2010, p.104). How autistic children conceptualised play in this study also has important implications for the role of educators in play. Of note, children highlighted the value of adults as co-players in play thus reaffirming calls for practitioners to get involved in children’s play (Danniels & Pyle, 2024). However, due consideration needs to be given to children’s level of autonomy and agency, as expressed by children in this study. This is critical in education as there are reports of uncertainty among practitioners surrounding their role in play (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2022; Danniels & Pyle, 2024). We need to provide empirical evidence that will help practitioners to support autistic children and ‘frame the play in ways that are meaningful to them and reflect their subjective experience’ (Wolfberg & Woods, 2023, p.1202).

Our findings further support concerns expressed by many researchers that the authenticity of play across play-based interventions for autistic children is problematic in particular with regards to capturing inward and dispositional features of autistic play (Jordan, 2003; Kossyvaki & Papoudi, 2016; Luckett, Bundy & Roberts, 2007; Wolfberg & Woods, 2023) that truly reflect meaningful play for children (Papoudi & Kossyvaki, 2018). We need a clear definition of autistic play in order to develop more robust theories of autistic play based on the players' perspectives. In doing so, we can systematically investigate important hypotheses and assumptions surrounding the causal relationship between play and autistic children's learning and development.

Finally, given the key role of play in Autism diagnostic criteria (APA, 2013), this research supports calls by Pritchard-Rowe et al. (2024) to move beyond deficit focused standards of play across diagnostic assessments and instead acknowledge strengths and differences in play in order to capture authentic play experiences and affective dimensions that are so often overlooked here.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research offers important insight into understanding autistic play which is integral in supporting children's quality of life (Howard, 2019) and in ensuring future research, policy and practice align with a neuroaffirmative understanding of play from the perspectives of the players themselves. However, there are some limitations to this study. Firstly, findings reflect the views of a predominately white autistic sample of children across two educational contexts within the Republic of Ireland and who primarily communicate using speech and, therefore, may not represent the views of all autistic children. Future research is needed with a more diverse sample of children and in particular underrepresented groups including those with cooccurring needs and intellectual disabilities who remain underrepresented in the literature. Although the sample of participants involved relatively equal numbers of boys and girls, future research would benefit from investigating gender differences in autistic children's understanding of play in particular given reports of masking in play among autistic girls (Pritchard-Rowe et al., 2024). Despite children playing an active role in the design of interviews, findings are reported and interpreted by the authors based on reflexive thematic analysis and thus were based on adult-mediated and neurotypical

interpretations of autistic children's views of play. Future research would benefit from direct involvement from autistic children and researchers at the analysis and reporting stages. Finally, this research was conducted in educational contexts which may have influenced children's perspectives on play although children did describe their views on play across a diverse range of environments such as the sensory room, classroom, playground and home.

Conclusion

This research reinforces the importance of consulting with the players themselves to gain an authentic understanding of autistic play and move beyond deficit-focused, non-autistic framed assumptions of autistic play that have persisted throughout the literature for decades. Children's conceptualisations of play extended beyond observable behaviours and emphasised the inward qualities of play that have traditionally been overlooked within research and practice.

Our findings support calls for further consultations with the players themselves in understanding autistic play and in informing future programmes of research, policy and practice. Play is an important part of children's lives, is critical for wellbeing and development and a fundamental right (UNCRC, 1989). This study extends our understanding of autistic play from the perspective of the players themselves and highlights key characteristics that must be recognised by educators and carers when facilitating autistic children's rights to play.

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