Understanding Play–Based Pedagogy in the Irish Infant Classroom

Introduction

Play has been accredited in key government documents as an efficient, developmentally appropriate method for early childhood education in Ireland (NCCA, 2009; DES, 2011). *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework, rolled out implementation guidelines for early childhood teachers in 2009, while the mandatory implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategy for learning and life for primary school was unveiled in 2011 (DES, 2011).

Play cannot be isolated from the main curriculum. Ultimately it helps children develop the knowledge and skills necessary for successful citizenship. Wood (2004) described the pedagogy of play as a technique wherein teachers develop play-based activities and create play-learning classrooms and the pedagogical skills and approaches to facilitate, support, and improve learning and teaching through play. Teachers' understandings clearly influence the relationships they form with children in their classrooms, and they are more likely to provide emotional security when they are 'responsive, playful and sensitive to children's emotional needs' (Whitebread, 2012, p.33).

Teaching and play

To facilitate a play-based pedagogy, it is essential for teachers to attain theoretical awareness of what play is. Some commentators have argued that for play to promote high-quality learning, it should be prepared well in advance and carefully considered (Broadhead, 2004; Wood, 2004; Wood and Attfield, 2005). The *Aistear* User Guide (NCCA, 2009, pp. 17–18) shows an example where infant teachers are urged to exercise 'circle of play' activities for one hour each day. This phase of play is

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There is growing interest in the play-based pedagogy known as *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) in the infant classroom. To facilitate a play-based pedagogy, it is essential for teachers to attain theoretical awareness of what play is and how it helps children learn and develop. This article provides an overview of this subject and outlines the obstacles to successful implementation of play-based pedagogy in infant classes in Ireland.

worthwhile, as children engage in self-directed discovery and forge learning links in a meaningful setting (Wood, 2004; NCCA, 2009).

By adopting this approach, teachers have occasion to allocate time for play-based activities through *Aistear* and to encourage children's play and eventual development and learning (Broadhead, 2004). Frost et al.'s (2008) work in these areas has ring-fenced a specific function in the creation of education theories, especially in how best to devise instructional strategies founded on appreciating how children learn. Nonetheless, general understandings of learning have been characteristically linked with a formal schooling environment, either eradicating or reducing the effect of learning outlets even before children enter a school.

Teachers of young children play a critical role in helping them develop self-regulation skills. But because early childhood is also an important period of imaginative play (Singer & Singer, 1990), wherein children think about make-believe situations more than at any other time of their lives, the formulation of balanced self-regulation largely depends on the characteristics of exterior stimuli. Like Bronfenbrenner (1979), Mead (1934) identified make-believe play as one of the prime stimuli of human development, while Bronson (2001) identified self-regulation as the highest accomplishment of early childhood.

Development in context

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When children are engaged in any form of play, whether make-believe, pretend play, or listening to stories offered in a playful way, they become responsive to learning concepts and developing relationships (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008). Children's thinking is embedded in a context that has meaning for them, whereas to a great extent school is 'disembedded' (Moyles, 2001). Activities such as 'filling in the blanks', worksheets, and 'colouring in' are often removed from meaning and purpose for the child and consequently make learning more complex (ibid.). Moreover, worksheets 'encourage obedience, passivity, and the mechanical application of techniques' (Kamii, 1985, p.120). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provides a framework that places individual development in the context where it takes place. Children thus develop not in isolation but through relationships and society.

Understandings are closely related to teacher approaches to dealing with barriers in their professional lives, their well-being, how they reform the student learning environment, and how they inspire student motivation and accomplishment. Research suggests that teacher behaviour in the classroom is inspired and shaped by their understandings (Rogers & Evans, 2008).

Infant teachers are particularly mindful of the centrality of play to children's development. As there is a direct correlation between teacher understandings

and practices, it is imperative that infant teachers establish their priorities for children before entering a class. Through play interactions, teachers can validate and challenge children's senses and thoughts, allowing them to focus on awareness, interactions, and intentions (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). To this end, to support additional learning, teachers must observe what children are doing, support their efforts, and become more thoughtfully involved.

Evidence indicates that teachers' understanding shapes their judgements more organically than abstract conceptualisations of child development and learning (Spodek, 1987). Infant teachers who have staunch convictions about basic-skill practices (i.e., highly structured teacher-directed education) are less inclined to support child-centred practices, while infant teachers who support a child-centred curriculum promote child autonomy and self-respect (Stipek and Byler, 1997).

Studies confirm that infant teachers generally adhere to belief systems and approaches that align with the developmentally appropriate practices that satisfy children's cognitive and age requirements (Stipek & Byler, 1997; Buchanan et al., 1998; Vartuli, 1999). This may be an indication of the positive appeal of child-centred practices and the residual effects of developmentally appropriate practice across numerous early childhood training programmes (Vartuli, 1999).

Findings

The works of Mead and Bronfenbrenner comprised the theoretical frame of reference for the present author's research. The study used a qualitative design, whose data sources included individual interviews, two-phase classroom observations, and before-and-after focus groups. Building on the initial findings, training sessions were put in place as continuous professional development (CPD). Data was analysed via content analysis and a constant-comparison approach.

Regardless of the current political support of a play-based approach, play receives only tangential positioning in infant classes in primary school classrooms in Ireland; teachers still identify formal didactic teaching as the proper work of the day.

There are a number of obstacles to successful implementation of play-based pedagogy in infant classes: time restrictions, large class sizes, shortage of space, and lack of continuing professional development (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Findings from the present study confirmed that regardless of the current political support of a play-based approach, play receives only tangential positioning in infant classes in primary school classrooms in Ireland; teachers still identify formal didactic teaching as the proper work of the day (ibid.).

Findings showed that teachers constructed a concept of 'play' in the infant classroom which emphasised the instrumental significance rather than the intrinsic significance of play. Teacher participants identified barriers to inclusively incorporating *Aistear* into the infant classroom. They considered a

formal didactic attitude essential for certain aspects of teaching, and they maintained that the degree of *Aistear* support in their school environment determined the efficacy of infant play-based pedagogy.

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Erik H. Erikson

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