Freely-Chosen, Intrinsically Motivated Play in the School Playground

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Play Definition and National Policies on Play
There seems to be some general agreement between Wales (2002, 2006), the Republic of Ireland (2004), England (2009) and Northern Ireland (2011) in relation to what defines play:

“Play encompasses children’s behavior which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward, and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development - not only for individual children, but also for the society in which they live” (WAG, 2002: p3)

‘Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child.’ (Rep I 2004) quoted from NPFA, PLAYLINK and CPC, 2000, p6)

“Play is what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons” (DCMS, 2004; DCMS2006; DCFS/DCMS, 2008)

“When playing, children define their own goals and interests, decide what is success and failure and pursue these goals in their own way” (Play and Leisure Policy Statement for Northern Ireland access 14th June 2011)
My Play Detective Diary

Are you a boy?  
Tick here

Are you a girl?  
Tick here

Draw a picture of yourself in this box........

How old are you?
One thing I played in the school playground today was: **School Playground**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who did you play with?</th>
<th>Own</th>
<th>Friend</th>
<th>Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Was an adult (grown up) playing as well?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whose idea was it to play?</th>
<th>My idea</th>
<th>Friend’s idea</th>
<th>Group idea</th>
<th>Adult’s idea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who told you to play?</th>
<th>Nobody</th>
<th>Friend did</th>
<th>Group did</th>
<th>Adult did</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who decided where it was played?</th>
<th>I did</th>
<th>Friend did</th>
<th>Group did</th>
<th>Adult did</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who was in charge of playing?</th>
<th>I was</th>
<th>Friend was</th>
<th>Group was</th>
<th>Adult was</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who finished the playing?</th>
<th>I did</th>
<th>Friend did</th>
<th>Group did</th>
<th>Adult did</th>
<th>Bell rang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did the play finish how you wanted it to?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Kind of</th>
<th>Not really</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Mean level of perceived choice across the different play environments

- After School Club: Average
- Home: Average
- School Playground: Average
A summary of the main findings across the three play environments of choice from this exploratory study found that:

- There was a significant difference in the amount of choice children had of their free play when playing in the school playground compared to playing at home and in their after school club.

- Most individual choices made in their free play was in the after school club and the least in the school playground.

- The amount of overall choices made in their free play was significantly reduced between playing alone, with a friend, or with a group in all environments.

- Children’s perceptions of choice in their free play were significantly reduced if an adult was involved in the play activity across all three environments.

- Girls appear to perceive more choice over their play than boys.
M.A.S.T – Manipulation of Affordance Scenario Tasks

The child’s play was ‘manipulated’ by changing the structural, the functional and the social aspects of their play by introducing different scenarios.

For the structural affordance two scenarios were introduced where the child’s play was moved from to a different area and the original space was reduced by half.

For the functional affordances two scenarios were introduced where the other children were playing proximal to the child and then they left but their equipment was left lying around.

For the social affordances two scenarios were introduced where unknown and known people joined in with their play.

Once the scenarios were explained children were asked if their level of choice changed. If there was any change in choice children were asked why it would change.
Manipulation of Structural Affordances (change play space and reduce play space)

M.A.S.T – Structural Affordances and children’s reduction in play and choice where total number of responses is n=32
Unsuitable Surface:
“Because I don't want to go on the grass and stay on the concrete”
(Interviewee 35, Change Space)

Safety:
“Because you could hurt yourself really, really badly probably” (Interviewee 15, Change Space – Structural)

Space Too Small:
"Because you would only have half the space and it wouldn't be as good and if it was your favourite you couldn't go on it" (Interviewee 22, Reduce Space)
Manipulation of Functional Affordances (proximal activities and equipment left)

M.A.S.T – Functional Affordances and children’s reduction in play and choice where total number of responses is n=17
Takes Over Play
“Because they might want to join in and you won't have much choice in the rhyme” (Interviewee 18, Proximal Activity – Functional-Social)

Distraction
“You have, you can't walk round really slowly you have to go fast to dodge all the people and football” (Interviewee 9, Proximal Activity – Functional-Social)

Safety
“When we run we may trip (when playing stuck in the mud)” (Interviewee 43, Equipment Left – Functional - Social)
Manipulation of Social Affordances (play with unknown and known people)

M.A.S.T – Social affordances and children's reduction in play and choice where total number of responses is n=43
**Told What To Do**

"No choice as I would get told off if I didn't play with her" (Interview 26, Unknown Child – Social affordance)

"If there was two new boys if they play football with us and they try to kick the ball in that direction you can't argue with them because it's their first time" (Interview 46, Unknown Group – Functional-Social)

**Too Many People**

“Because I don't really know them and I don't want like too much people playing or it's going to get in a mess and go into a fight or arguing or something” (Interview 6, Unknown Group – Social)

**Distraction**

"Don't know what they are talking about" (Interviewee 30, Unknown Group – Social)

“If I had the hoop I would not get many goes because they would be shouting” (Interviewee 14, Known Group – Functional-Social)
M.A.S.T – Combined Structural, Functional and Social Affordances and children’s reduction in play and choice where n=81
Preliminary Findings – School Playground only

Summary of preliminary findings

Children’s level of choice was significantly reduced when the structural, functional and social affordances were manipulated

Manipulation of structural affordances mainly resulted in reduction of choice for structural affordance reasons which were the surface is unsuitable, safety and the space too small

Manipulation of functional affordances mainly resulted in reduction of choice for functional-social reasons which were takes over play, safety and play being distracted

Manipulation of social affordances mainly resulted in reduction of choice for social and functional-reasons which were takes over play, told what to do; too many people and play is distracted

When combining the structural, functional and social affordance results, most reasons for a reduction in play were social-functional and social affordance groups

Children still perceived they were playing although their level of choice was reduced
“That in play he adopts the line of least resistance, i.e., he does what he feels like most because play is connected with pleasure. At the same time, he learns to follow the line of greatest resistance; for by subordinating themselves to rules, children renounce what they want, since subjection to rule and renunciation of spontaneous impulsive action constitute the path to maximum pleasure in play” (Vygotsky 1978: p12)

“The individual: takes the attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another, take their attitudes toward the various phases or aspects of the common social activity or set of social undertakings in which, as members of an organized society or social group, they are all engaged” (Mead 1934: p154)
References


