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Free choice and free play in early childhood education: troubling the discourse

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This article troubles the established discourse of free choice and free play in early childhood education, and develops post-structural approaches to theorising children's agency in the context of institutional and relational power structures. It is widely accepted that planning a curriculum based on children's needs, interests and patterns of learning promotes agency, self-regulation and control. However, contemporary research extends this discourse through critical examination of child-centred and developmental perspectives, and by theorising children's agency as a means of enacting power relationships in play. Using naturalistic, interpretive methods for documenting children's choices of play activities, this small-scale study focuses on 10 children in an Early Years Foundation Stage setting in England. Combining contemporary socio-cultural and post-structural theories, the findings indicate that children's choices are situated within shifting power structures and relationships, involving conflict, negotiation, resistance and subversion. These activities create opportunities for exercising and affirming group and individual agency. The study raises critical questions about how children make and manage their choices, and examines the implications for policy and practice in light of restrictive curriculum frameworks.

Keywords: free play; free choice; agency; post-structural theory; sociocultural theory

1. Problematising free play and free choice

The established discourse of child-centred education makes universal assumptions about young children's abilities to engage in free choice and free play activities, and to benefit from the unique opportunities that play allows for their learning and development, socialisation, and imaginative capabilities (Broadhead 2004; Diachenko 2011; McInnes et al. 2009; Samuelsson and Carlsson 2008; Tzuo 2007). Children should be relatively free from adult intrusion and direction, enabling them to exercise agency, self-regulation, ownership, and control, and to direct their own learning. Play policies across the UK and in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) propose that choice is characteristic of play, and research on children's perspectives consistently shows that they value freedom from structure, making choices, and having time to themselves (Kapasi and Gleave 2009). However, there are increasing tensions between 'play-based' approaches and the structured curriculum goals in national policy frameworks. This is increasingly evident as many countries move towards centrally defined curricula for early childhood (ranging from birth to 7/8 years) (Brooker and Edwards 2010; Stephen 2010;

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Wood 2010a, 2010b). Although child-centred discourses maintain significant power, evidence across international contexts documents the challenges that practitioners encounter in implementing curricula that combine freedom and structure (Bodrova 2008; Broadhead, Howard, and Wood 2010; File, Mueller, and Wisneski 2012; Hedges and Cullen 2011; Walsh et al. 2011). Much research problematises free choice and free play from a structural perspective, and identifies constraints such as policy frameworks, space, time, adults' roles, rules, parents' expectations and the pushdown effects from the primary curriculum (Markström and Halldén 2009; Wisneski and Reifel 2012). In reality, free choice and free play are always controlled within educational settings because of teachers' beliefs and values, the different meanings they attribute to play (Sherwood and Reifel 2010), the variations in curriculum enactment (Wood 2010b) and broader goals for children's behaviour and classroom order (Millei 2012).

Other pedagogical problems are identified by Hedges (2010) in a study of teachers' knowledge and children's interests. Hedges makes a critical distinction between play interests and enquiry-based interests, and argues that teachers might underestimate children's interests through 'shallow interpretations'. Her research proposes deeper engagement with their funds of knowledge, skills and dispositions from school, home and community contexts (2010, 29), which involves identifying children's deep-seated, enquiry-based interests (including serious issues of citizenship, culture and identity) as well as activity-based play interests.

This more complex conceptualisation may be difficult to achieve in practice, because institutional and policy versions of free choice and free play provide socially approved (and restricted) opportunities for children's agency. Wood (2010a) argues that recommendations from research on the educational effectiveness of preschool provision support restricted versions of 'planned and purposeful play': because the choices offered must align with curriculum goals, the demands of 'outcomes-led' policy drivers privilege adults' rather than children's choices, with the outcomes being interpreted developmentally in relation to curriculum goals (Brooker 2011). Thus the child-centred theories that value free play and free choice are at odds with policy frameworks that maintain a discourse of universalism (most children following similar pathways through a defined curriculum). Paradoxically, where free choice and free play are privileged as the main ways in which children learn, this may reduce opportunities for children to choose activities alongside adults, in which they can share interests and intentions, through flexible and responsive engagement. Research that focuses on children's perspectives provides more nuanced understanding of these issues.

1.1. Children's perspectives and cultures

A sociopolitical dimension is evident in studies of children's choices that draw on critical post-structural theories, and examine what choice means to children, and whose agency, power and interests are exercised or marginalised, specifically in relation to power relationships between children, and between children and adults (Blaise and Ryan 2012). Recent studies have identified variations in what – and whose – choices are allowed (Ryan 2005) and in the types of play that are restricted, such as rough and tumble and 'aggressive' play (Jarvis 2007a, 2007b). Practitioners may also fear the 'dark side' of play, which is associated with subversion, disorder and transgression of social rules (Henricks 2010, 2011; Sutton-Smith 1997).

Three significant themes are evident in research that links these issues to concerns with equity and diversity. First, children's repertoires of participation in self-initiated

activities can be influenced by home-based cultures, child-rearing practices and expectations of schooling, with variations evident in the play of toddlers (Goncü, Mistry, and Mosier 2000), and older children (Brooker 2006, 2010). In culturally diverse communities, home-based child-rearing practices may not be consistent with flexible approaches in which children are expected to develop free choice, independence and self-management strategies. Children may be disadvantaged by these approaches because they encounter different expectations for schooling, as shown by Levinson's (2005) ethnographic research on the role of play in the formation and maintenance of cultural identity in Gypsy-Roma-Traveller communities. Children who have not been enculturated into western forms of 'educational' play experience early childhood settings as limiting rather than enabling their participation, which may put them at a disadvantage in accessing the curriculum or negotiating childhood and classroom cultures (Brooker 2010). Therefore, cultural distance and dissonance are significant concerns in problematising free play and free choice.

Second, gender emerges as a strong influence on children's choices. Drawing on post-structural theories which emphasise the social construction of gender as performance, Blaise (2005) examined the ways in which children in an urban kindergarten classroom constructed themselves as 'boy' or 'girl'. Case studies of three children illustrated their individual perceptions of gender and how they each chose to 'perform' this understanding in their behaviours. Their play choices varied in accordance with their differing notions – and related performances – of gender, and contributed to the construction of gendered identities and practices. Fabes, Martin, and Hanish (2003) also document gender differences in children's play choices in relation to play qualities, including active-forceful play, play near adults and stereotyped activity choice.

Third, children's repertoires of participation can be influenced by ethnicity, social class and ability/disability. Fishbein, Malone, and Stegelin (2009) found that the playmate preferences of preschool children can be based on race, sex and perceived physical attractiveness, which can influence the maintenance of boundaries between social groups. For children with special educational needs, accessing play can be challenging, and adults' actions can sometimes unknowingly make this task more difficult. For example, de Groot Kim (2005) describes her observations of Kevin, a 3-year-old American child who had motor difficulties. His assistant, Katie, acted as his coach, play partner and constant companion in the kindergarten he attended three days each week. When Katie was not present in the last half hour of each session, the researcher found that Kevin's behaviour altered. Through self-initiated activities, he engaged more with other children, spoke in sentences (previously, he had not been known to do this) and showed more agency and motivation in his choices, such as where and with whom to play. While Katie's role was to help Kevin, in some respects her behaviours, and mere presence, were barriers to his continuing development and access to other children and their play.

Several studies have examined children's repertoires of choice and participation, including their activity preferences, peer group cultures and affiliations; the overall mix of choices fall between structured and free activities, and individual and group strategies. Skånfors, Löfdahl, and Hägglund (2009) used ethnographic methods to study children's withdrawal strategies in a Swedish preschool setting. Their findings indicate the strategies used as children negotiated their own time and space: making oneself inaccessible, acting distant, reading books, hiding, creating and protecting shared hidden spaces, creating physical space and constantly moving. Similarly, Markström and Halldén 2009 describe children as being part of a collective, which can inhibit their ability to establish themselves as individuals. However, their tactics for resisting regulation included creating time and space for themselves; using alternative spaces, artefacts and rules to suit their

own purposes; and using the ‘wrong’ toys in the ‘wrong’ rooms (2009, 116). Markström and Halldén (2009) report children’s successful use of the following strategies in their attempts to secure their own time/space/play agenda: silence and avoidance, negotiating, collaborating with and rescuing other children and collaborating to defend their space.

These studies demonstrate that play is a distinctive form of activity, in which children’s motivation to play reflects their need to develop mastery of play, and to enact forms of agency that are often denied to them in other contexts. Henricks (2011, 212) argues that in playful modes, self-interest (and the possibility of subterfuge from others) is to be expected, along with the willingness of players to exploit situations when they can. In summary, the forms of agency that children enact in free choice and free play activities are different from those sanctioned by adults, or advocated within child-centred discourses. This suggests that choice and agency are complex processes that need further theoretical definition than is evident in child-centred discourse.

1.2. Problematising agency

Within sociocultural theories, agency is manifested in the freedom and ability to change one’s circumstances, and therefore has transformative potential:

In developing an educational program ... we strive to direct ourselves consciously towards the cultivation of the fundamental human ability, the ability to construct and transform independently one’s own life activity, to be its true agent. It is precisely this ability that enables a person to define herself in the world of life, to become involved in existing kinds of learning activity and forms of interaction with other people and create new ones. (Davydov, Slobodchikov, and Tsukerman 2003, 63)

From this perspective, agency involves the ability to learn, to teach oneself and to develop reflexivity and metacognitive capacities. Viewing agency as material and relational, Wertsch (1998, 24) uses the concept of ‘agent-acting-with-meditational-means’ to highlight the ways in which artefacts and tools mediate and connect individuals with each other and the material environment. Artefacts and tools are not merely ‘things’, but tools of the mind: Even in free play, children have already appropriated cultural tools and routines that guide and shape their activities, and can be transformed according to their own meanings and purposes. In contrast, post-structural theories extend the sociocultural concept of children being agents in their learning and development, because agency is enmeshed within wider social and institutional structures, thereby requiring that children learn to use and resist different strategies and techniques of power. By combining sociocultural and post-structural perspectives, it is proposed that children’s agency involves their motivation to learn, to become more competent and knowledgeable and to manage the social dynamics of institutional and interpersonal power. These concepts are explored in an interpretivist study of young children’s free choice and free play activities.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

The aims of this study were to document and critically examine children’s individual and group choices during periods of free choice and free play, and to reveal how the social dynamics of power operate within different contexts. The study is informed by an interpretivist ontology using naturalistic observations and qualitative methods of data

collection, including immersion in the context, mainly non-participant observations of free choice activities and informal discussions with the children and adults in the setting. The methods allowed for some flexibility in choosing which children to observe in each session, and for how long. The aim was to portray the range of children's choices; how activities were initiated; the strategies they used to become involved, and to sustain or end their activities; and who else was involved (including adults and peers). The study was conducted in an Early Years Foundation Stage setting in a rural town in England, in a self-contained building in the grounds of a Primary School. The sampling strategy was purposeful: the focus was mainly on 10 children who attended the morning sessions (8:45–11:30) and would transfer to the Reception class following the summer holiday. They were between 3.10 and 4.5 years old, and were experienced as a group because they had attended this class for the previous two terms.

In accordance with contemporary ethical guidelines (BERA 2004), informed consent was sought from parents (as required by the school's policy), and consent from the children was sought for each observation period. The concept of situated ethics was important in this respect because, from a child's perspective, consent may be provisional (Flewitt 2005), and they have a right to express their choices on an ongoing basis because they may not fully understand consent at a single point in time. Therefore, continuous ethical reflexivity was needed during observations. For example, sometimes children became silent as I approached, and either moved from the activity, or showed through their body language that they did not wish to be observed. I respected those cues and moved away.

Observations typically began at the start of a child's chosen activity, and continued until the activity ended, or changed. Around 48 hours of observation were conducted over 12 weeks, involving the focus children and peers who were included in their choices. The observations were recorded via a running record, with myself as the observer sitting as near as possible to the activity to hear the dialogue. On occasions, the children asked for help, or engaged in spontaneous conversations, which I recorded. Running records have the benefit of being low on intrusion into children's play, but are demanding of the researcher's attention, and run the risk of fatigue. To support the observations, a digital camera was used to record the activities on offer each day, and as an aide memoire of specific events. Additional notes were written during break times and at the end of the sessions.

Initially, the choice of who to observe was informed by the aim to document each child's repertoires of choice activities over time. As I became familiar with the children's repertoires, my choices focused on the themes emerging from the data, and connections with the methodological and theoretical framing of the study. Consistent with interpretive methodology, my personal subjectivity was integral to the research through the processes of exploration, explanation, interaction, critical reflection and interpretation (Reifel 2007; Silverman 2006). During organised group activities, such as snack time, I continued to take notes, which provided additional details of the children's activities in a range of contexts. For example, during group snack time, the adults arranged the chairs in a circle and chose two 'helpers' to put each child's name card on a chair. This activity was subverted on a daily basis by children who could recognise their own and others' names, and swapped the cards so they could sit with their friends. I saw this as an expression of free choice and resistance within an adult-controlled context, which the adults accepted (with amusement).

At the end of each session I read the data, added further information, and noted my reflections and questions. Discussions took place with team members, including the

nursery teacher (NT), the qualified nursery teaching assistant (NTA) and other regular assistants (TA). The observations were gradually transformed into texts, which allowed for multiple interpretations of social meanings (Reifel 2007; Blaise 2005), and through which the children's choices, narratives and symbolic representations become visible (Wood and Hall 2011). The texts reflect the flow of activities, conversations and utterances and also the interactions between children, adults and the environment.

2.2. Analytical processes

The interpretive analytical processes included immersion in the data, identifying patterns, being alert to new ideas, speculating about the meanings and functions of events and reflecting on the possible implications. By segmenting the observations into units of analysis, the processes of textual analysis, reflection and clarification with the NT and NTA led to further refinements and theoretical interpretation. Through these processes I gradually built a picture of individual and shared choices and repertoires of participation, and identified key themes, some of which were theoretically driven. The purpose of interpreting texts is not to provide answers to pre-defined problems, but to generate interpretations and open these for critical scrutiny in ways that may provide new or alternative perspectives. Therefore, some of the themes are posed as questions for further reflection and theoretical consideration, rather than as definitive findings.

Vignettes from the texts illustrate the key themes. *Obs 1.2.3* refers to the temporal sequence of the observations. Each observation was sectioned into episodes where the focus was on different children, or on the same child for an extended period of time, but with a change of activities (for example, moving from indoor play to outdoor play).

3. Analysis

3.1. Individual and group agency

The findings indicate different ways in which children exercise agency through their choices, revealing their funds of knowledge, individual dispositions, willingness to disrupt the rules of the setting and ability to manage events and peers.

Obs 1: Spontaneous glee

The children are lining up to walk over to the school hall. Leanne begins a spontaneous outburst of 'dizzy play'. She giggles, shakes her hands, head, then whole body. She spins round in a gleeful dance, tapping peers on the shoulder as she does. They join in. The orderly line is soon an energetic mass of dizzy players, which ends when Leanne intentionally falls onto the floor, and others pile in a heap. Order has to be restored by the adults before the children can get back into a line.

Agency can also be linked to the demonstration of skills and knowledge. In seven episodes of Leanne's observed free choice activities, she chooses to play alone, but often verbalises her thinking, as demonstrated in the following episode.

Obs 6: Outdoor play – hopscotch

Leanne has chosen the chalks and draws a hopscotch grid. She measures out the grid with her feet, and counts out loud to 15. She draws the grid, writes the numerals in each square and counts backwards from 15. She runs off to look for a bike, but soon returns. 'I've no vehicle

to go on'. She continues to draw the grid, counting backwards and completing the numerals in the squares.

'15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4 3, 2, Oh no, I need another one'.

She draws another square. 'There, that's one. That's all there now'.

The grid is too small for her to play hopscotch, but the drawing and counting appear to be the main purposes of the activity. Leanne enjoys mathematics, and agency is evident in her confidence, self-regulation and competence in choosing and managing similar activities.

3.2. Nature and purposes of interventions by adults, and the challenge of rules

The following episodes continue the theme of individual and group agency in the context of challenging the rules of the setting, and the resulting adult interventions. The success of play activities can depend on who is playing, as children bring different skills and knowledge. Agency is expressed through children's confidence to lead the play and invent ways of challenging rules.

Obs 2: Outdoor play with hollow blocks: Alfie, Max, Joseph, Joel, Leanne, Henry

The large hollow blocks have been laid out in a circle by the adults, in one layer, with a small gap between them, and a foam mat in the centre. The intention is for the children to develop their gross-motor and loco-motor skills (specifically balancing), sharing and co-operation, by stepping from one block to another. The activity is well within their capabilities, but for the first four minutes they use the blocks as they have been laid out. Leanne pretends to wobble and 'falls' onto the mat. 'Look, I can't do it. I'll have to fall in the sea'. The children make a game of this. There is some rough and tumble play as they 'swim' back to the blocks and 'rescue' each other.

Max has been experimenting by jumping rather than stepping between blocks. He extends the challenge as he puts one block on top of another. This widens the gap, and Max tries to jump between the blocks. Alfie, Joel, and Joseph watch carefully, as if they are assessing the challenge before they join in. A new rule is invented: They jump from one block to another, then 'dive' into the 'sea' where they do forward and backward rolls. The NT intervenes to stop their activity as it is not safe. She reminds them that they are allowed the blocks in one layer only. The children return to the stepping activity, going round in a circle, but with little interaction.

Obs 6: Outdoor play with hollow blocks: Joel, Alfie, Edward, Leanne

The safety rule for block play is that the children cannot build 'higher than their tummy buttons'.

This episode begins with the children playing individually with the blocks. Alfie says 'We've built a plane', and the play develops into making an airport with a runway, and 'a place for helicopters to land on the roof'. Leanne offers her experiences of travel: She lines up small chairs for the waiting area, and lays out a piece of material for 'the place where your cases go round and round'. They start to build higher, and try get around the safety rule by standing on one, then two layers of blocks so that the top of the structure is still up to their tummy buttons. The NT intervenes to remind them of the rule. They have to reduce the height of the

airport and build only from the ground – the NT observes until this is done, but does not ask them about their play. The play ends when the airport has been dismantled.

Another rule in the setting is that five children can play in the outdoor area if an adult is not present. The children are expected independently to manage their time and turn-taking, by wearing a yellow band. Some of the older boys often ‘hide’ in the playhouse if they cannot get a yellow band. Part of the play routine involves popping their heads through the window to see what is happening, and to check for adult supervision.

Obs 8:

Ben is in the playhouse, alone. He does not have a yellow band, and there are already five children in the outdoor area on wheeled toys. Leanne, Evie and three boys are racing around. Leanne goes to the playhouse and asks if she can come in. Ben sends her away and Leanne goes indoors to seek help from an adult to help her gain entry into the playhouse. The TA sees Ben in the playhouse, and when she reminds him of the rules, Ben says he is the naughty dog who has to stay there because there are too many bikes for dogs to go out and play.

One of the intentions here may be boundary maintenance, specifically using subterfuge to challenge the adults’ boundaries and establish their own. These findings resonate with Henricks (2010, 198), who views power and agency from post-structural perspectives, and argues that players wish to do more than reassure themselves about their own powers: they wish to know what the world will do when it is provoked. The children are provoking the world by subverting the rules, but are prepared to take the risk of being ‘found out’. Individual and group agency is thus imbued with the social dynamics of power, and is expressed through children’s peer cultures, social relationships and their networks of influence.

3.3. When do children seek adults’ assistance, attention, affirmation and support?

Although the focus in this study was mainly on child-initiated activities, there were many examples of children choosing adult-directed activities – with obvious enjoyment, involvement and engagement. These included cooking, creative arts, dance, games, visits (for example to the local fire station) and computer activities. The practitioners used playful approaches for learning songs, organising daily routines and preparing children for transition to the reception class. It is well documented that the everyday structures and routines of preschool settings interrupt children’s play (Markström and Hällden 2009), and this is often seen in negative terms. However, the children had relatively long periods of time for free play (around 45 minutes) and routines served important purposes – for example, participating in snack time – with informal social chat between adults and children, and whole group sessions of outdoor play so that everyone had the opportunity to use the wheeled toys and fixed outdoor play equipment. The well-being of the children was evident in their relationships with adults, enthusiastic participation in these structured activities and willingness to abide by rules (at least some of the time). This is consistent with Tzuo (2007, 38) who argues that teacher control and children’s freedom can be balanced, and can be played out in continually interactive ways.

3.4. Inclusion and exclusion

There are many examples of children acting pro-socially to include their peers, particularly among groups of players with strong friendships and established play routines. However, strategies for joining play had to be learned and earned. Owen, a three-year-old boy, made frequent attempts to join the play of an established friendship group of boys. He was sometimes included, depending on the joining tactics he used. On the occasions when Owen threw himself physically into the play he was excluded, because he damaged the boys' constructions. When Owen stood by as an observer and occasional commentator, he was allowed partial involvement (for example, holding a block or being given a role). Owen accepted these directions, seemingly for the satisfaction of being included with this group of experienced and possibly 'high status' boys.

In a teacher-directed activity in the computer suite, Owen struggled with the 'Paint and Draw' programme because he did not know how to use the mouse. Joel and Chris were nearby and, although they were competent users of this programme, they did not break off their activity to help. Later, when they chose the computer in the nursery, they included Owen and provided direct instruction in moving the mouse: teaching him to click and drag, and giving him praise for his efforts. There were other instances where inclusion/exclusion strategies were context-dependent rather than a systematic attempt to marginalise particular children or groups. However, overall, there was relatively little cooperative play between the older focus children and their younger peers.

Children sometimes chose to exclude themselves from play. For example, if Joseph's preferred peers were absent, he chose solitary play, even when other children asked to join or suggested play activities. In *Obs 5*, Joseph made a soldier's hat, and marched around the setting. Some boys tried to initiate 'soldiers' play, but Joseph continued marching, did not look at them, and remained silent. Joseph's choice of solitary play seemed preferable to choosing alternative play mates. His peers' desire to play with him reflects Joseph's status as a skilled player, as evidenced in his leadership of role play in other episodes.

3.5. Moments of frustration: what are the children's intentions, and how are these resolved?

Moments of frustration arise when children experience challenges in making and managing choices, and involve exclusion from activities, disputes over toys and resources, task difficulty and inability to exercise agency. For example, Leanne and Alfie had a physical struggle over a scooter, with Leanne shouting, screaming and crying. She was temporarily calmed by the adult, who provided another scooter, but because it was too small, Leanne started crying again. Success in resolving frustration seems to be related to children's physical and social skills, mood states and emotional competence. Leanne shows considerable emotional resilience in some contexts, but not in others. In *Obs 7*, Leanne spent 22 minutes with April, making a tiger mask. She holds the mask to her face and roars at April, who becomes distressed, 'Don't be frightened, April, it's only me, Leanne'. Leanne shows an understanding of theory of mind: she is acting as if she is a fierce tiger, but is aware that April might actually be frightened. Whether children limit or sustain their involvement with peers may be linked to task difficulty, specifically the extent to which children are able to manage and orchestrate the different elements needed to sustain play.

3.6. The meaning of whispering: controlling what others hear, and controlling what can be heard by others

Children show their awareness of both inclusion and exclusion strategies and the effects of the strategies. For example, in *Obs 7*, Leanne feels excluded when she sees April and Evie whispering then playing together: 'Every time they play together they leave me out'. However, Evie shows some empathy and cooperative skills by including Leanne: 'Come on, girls, I'll hold your hand. Let's all hold hands'.

Over time, a tenuous friendship pattern emerges between Evie and Leanne as they alternate between inclusion and exclusion, based on cooperation and competition. In *Obs 8*, they play energetically on the bikes, racing each other around the playground. Leanne shouts 'Let me through', but Evie refuses: 'No, Leanne, I'm the person who goes first'. These two girls appear to be testing the boundaries of their influence on each other and on their peers. Negotiating power relationships in play requires complex interpersonal and inter-subjective skills, such as realising when you can get your own way, and under what circumstances. These skills are crucial to determining whose choices take precedence, and how the play is managed – specifically, who can enter and be involved.

3.7. Moments of silence

There are several instances of children using silence as a way of excluding themselves or others from the play. In *Obs 10*, Henry is playing with the dolls' house, but ignores Leanne's loud and insistent demands to join in. Eventually Henry nods his assent, but this may have been because I was nearby. Faye joins in, but is not interacting with Henry and Leanne. They play in parallel, with some self-speech and minimal interaction, although Leanne tries to engage the others:

Leanne: 'Here's the baby, Henry. Look at the baby'.

Henry looks in her direction but offers no response. Leanne places her pony and play people precisely in two rooms. There is some brief interaction between Henry and Faye but mostly about which rooms they can play in. They are each sticking to their own spaces, even though there has been no negotiation of which space 'belongs' to each child. Parallel play continues to 10.35 (snack time), with little engagement between the children.

Several interpretations for silence can be proposed. Henry does not often play with girls, and he may have resented his choice being interrupted by Leanne and Faye. Silence appears to be used here as a strategy for excluding self and excluding others, which can be seen as a power effect of choice and agency. There are other possible interpretations about why silences occur. Many of the episodes reveal the complex processes of aligning perspectives and social affiliations. Silence may reflect the inability or unwillingness of the participants to effect these alignments, which may again relate to task difficulty.

3.8. Walking, running and observing

In many episodes, the focus children are seen walking or running around the setting, or standing still to observe specific activities. Running at the start of a session expresses their excitement and interest: they appear to be checking who has arrived, and what range of activities is on offer. Sometimes children walk alone, in pairs or a group, just chatting, or deciding what activity to choose. Their choices may be intentional or opportunistic.

For example, in *Obs 3*, Ronan and Joel are observed for 10 minutes walking around individually, occasionally stopping, talking to others or to self, humming or chanting. Ronan picks up a silver bolt and examines it, then explains to Joel that it is a 'sonic screwdriver' (from the television programme *Doctor Who*) that 'can open doors'. Their play develops momentum as they take it in turns to 'zap things'. They run around the setting, looking for monsters and killing them, throwing themselves on bean bags, being killed by monsters, playing dead and coming alive.

The analysis portrays some of the ways in which free choice is exercised through an individual and collective agency. The findings reveal the extent to which the children were able to make choices, and the strategies they used to sustain and manage their choices. Making choices involves different forms of agency such as pretence, managing task difficulty, negotiating social power dynamics and orchestrating individual and group activities.

4. Discussion

The findings are interpreted through sociocultural and post-structural theories. Because there are multiple systems of meaning operating between children, multiple readings are needed in order to understand the ways in which free play and free choice involve different forms of agency, and the ways in which agency operates to construct social power dynamics and relationships for individuals and groups. Group play is a complex orchestration of social, physical, cognitive, cultural, temporal and relational processes. However, when children exercise group agency through pretence, this has different meanings than in non-play contexts. The concept of agency in free choice and free play activities often requires the exercise of an imaginary power, but within particular frames of reference; as evidenced in children's drawings (Wood and Hall 2011), in role play (Broadhead 2004) and in playground games (Jarvis 2007a, 2007b). Henricks (2010, 202) argues that because many aspects of the world are too vast or too powerful to be played with, play usually involves an attempt to place these matters into much narrower situations over which individuals can exercise some measure of control. Therefore, pretence is a form of agency: by creating imaginary roles and events, the children in this study created their own situations, rules and internal logic. They transformed people and objects in ways that present different possibilities for control or resistance in ways that enabled them to exercise and affirm their agency. Thus, the person who has been killed can come alive again to rejoin the play; there can be five children in the role play area because one of them is the naughty dog, and does not 'count' as a child. The naughty dog can be controlled by children in the play, but at the same time is a rebellion against adult-imposed rules. Children are not simply influenced by their environments but act in ways that change them. Through such meditational means and activities, children exercise individual and collective agency because they are learning about the internal rules that govern play, the self-control and self-regulation that are needed to sustain play, and ways of resisting adults' rules or boundaries. These processes therefore have particular significance as forms of affirmation for children as agents in their ability to change their circumstances, and in their learning and development. Thus a sociocultural interpretation includes distributed pretence, through which children express agency in the imaginative, collective and relational nature of their choices.

Motivation and agency appear to be linked through expression of the children's identities, such as being seen as a competent player and play leader, being a member of a skilled peer group or having the confidence to subvert adults' rules. Agency is expressed

differently by children through their knowledge, dispositions, actions and behaviours. The effects include exercising power with or over others, through strategies that suggest elements of self-interest such as refusal to play, inclusion or exclusion of peers, and drawing and maintaining boundaries. Agency can thus be expressed in multiple ways within the many paradoxes of play such as seeking order and disorder, creating and subverting rules, being inclusive and exclusive and being sociable and unsociable (and possibly anti-social). From a post-structural perspective, children's choices therefore reflect their vested interests in exercising power with or against others as a means of constructing peer cultures and identities. As Henricks argues:

Playful children can be petulant, boisterous, careless with the feelings of others, and downright mean. They are fond of 'showing off' and 'grossing out' one another. They are hungry for the peer-based status that comes from demonstrating their defiance of adult roles. (2010, 204)

There is evidence of the juxtaposition of adults' rules and children's resistance. Even in relatively democratic pedagogical repertoires, adults usually define what choices are available; what degrees of freedom are allowed; and what institutional rules and boundaries need to be placed on free play, free choice and behaviour (Millei 2012). Several forms of group and individual rebelliousness were observed, from spontaneous glee and dizzy play to intentional subversion of rules. This does not mean that children were consistently antagonistic towards adults, because they often sought their help and involvement in a range of activities. However, free choice/free play activities have a different status from adult-directed activities, because of the potential for subverting institutional rules. So rebelliousness aligns with the positions outlined by Henricks (2010, 2011) and Sutton-Smith (1997) regarding the transformative or revolutionary potential of play in which children's play interests may be intrinsically bound with their self-interests, including status and identity maintenance.

Although agency is expressed in different ways through children's engagement in a range of activities, the freedom to make choices does not always put children in control nor are they always empowered. The children's activities were socially complex because they were solving contextual and relational problems which involved managing the social dynamics of power, often without the help of adults. However, they did not always have the skills and knowledge to do this successfully, which meant that they could make, but not consistently manage, their choices. Although it is possible to interpret some of the children's behaviours in terms of developmental theories, this would not account for the challenges that young children encounter when they have this degree of freedom to choose, and are expected to manage complex social dynamics. Thus rather than seeing play as the natural developmental activity of early childhood, attention needs to be given to 'task difficulty' in free choice/free play activities. Task difficulty was often related to those characteristics of play that are considered to be developmentally beneficial, but actually require a repertoire of strategies, such as orchestrating tasks, negotiating power relationships, managing inclusion and exclusion, maintaining self-regulation, developing resilience and taking risks.

By combining contemporary sociocultural and post-structural theories, a complex conceptualisation of agency has been proposed, which combines individual, social and material influences regarding how children learn to use, and resist strategies and techniques of power. Children are social actors, and their capacities for agency include their ability to create and interpret for themselves their social and cultural worlds, often

by using pretence as a form of agency. These complex processes encompass more than children's natural motivation to play, or their developmental needs: agency is an expression of individual identities and peer cultures, interests and self-interests and a testing ground for whose freedom, power and control can be exercised. Children use free choice and free play for their own purposes, where the choices they make have implications for others, reflecting the serious issues of citizenship, culture and identity identified by Hedges (2010).

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to trouble established discourses about free choice and free play, and has developed a conceptualisation of agency which combines sociocultural and post-structural theories. However, it is insufficient to merely 'trouble' the discourses that influence policy and practice, and the taken-for-granted assumptions about play; it is also necessary to trouble the implications for practice (Blaise and Ryan 2012).

It is argued that the established discourse needs to be reconsidered in light of the challenges presented in contemporary play research, specifically how choice relates to issues of agency and power, interests and self-interests. The process of recognising *that* power relations exist in children's play may be uncomfortable for early childhood educators, especially if they are steeped in universal certainties about the efficacy of play for children's learning and development. Recognising *how* those power relationships are played out presents another discomfort, because it requires educators to see play as a political and negotiated terrain and to focus on issues of agency, power and control between adults and children, and between children (Millei 2012; Ryan 2005).

If spontaneous and responsive pedagogies are to be sustained, then educators need to be aware of children's repertoires of choice, specifically the ways in which the freedom to choose may advantage some, but disadvantage others. This is not an argument for limiting children's choices and exerting more adult control. However, it is an argument for critical engagement with established discourses about free choice and free play, and the underpinning knowledge bases for practice. Interrogating these discourses also involves acknowledging the complexity of children's experiences, especially in relation to the reductive versions of play in many national policy frameworks and educational effectiveness discourses. Moreover, if practitioners focus only on assessing the forms of knowledge, skills and understanding that are inscribed in curriculum frameworks, they will achieve fixed and partial meanings and interpretations of children's free play activities. In contrast, by paying attention to microanalyses of play, alternative meanings and interpretations become accessible, which open the possibility for deeper engagement with the sociopolitical dimensions of children's play cultures and practices.

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