

Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Play as a context for Early Learning and Development

A research paper

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Margaret Kernan, Ph D

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Introduction

The image of the child presented in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (2004) is that of a capable and active learner. Supporting this image is the identification of play and relationships as the two primary contexts for learning. By viewing early learning through the 'relationships lens', the Framework emphasises the highly interactive and social nature of learning. The question arises regarding the specific understanding of, and role of play, within such a vision for learning in the early years.

This paper is part of a series of four research papers accompanying the *Framework for Early Learning*¹. The paper addresses the relationship between play, development and learning with the ultimate aim of elaborating on the place of play in the Framework. In this respect, the paper seeks both to re-examine the 'taken for granted' position of play as central to early childhood curricula, and to conceptualise a rigorous understanding of a 'pedagogy of play' that has relevance for children in the diversity of early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings in Ireland, and across the broad age range of early childhood from birth to six years. Throughout the paper, the term 'pedagogy of play' is used to capture the content and approach to play in the context of ECCE settings and in particular in relation to children's well-being, learning and development. A pedagogy of play, thus, incorporates theory and everyday practice with children. This practice includes planning, relationships, the organisation of the physical environment and reflection. Emphasis is also placed on the ongoing learning of the pedagogue or early years practitioner, and on the child (Moss and Petrie, 2002). The paper acknowledges the distinct roles that parents and early years practitioners play in children's lives and the specialised nature of early years practitioners' work with children. Yet at times, the paper purposely blurs the distinction between pedagogical practices in ECCE settings and home contexts.

The paper is broadly divided into three sections. The purpose of Section 1 is to locate the discussion within the broad context of the place of play in early childhood from both children's and adults' perspectives. This part also addresses the various ways play has been framed within ECCE curricula in different contexts with particular attention on the role of the adult in play. Finally, attention is placed firmly on the place of play in Irish ECCE policy and practice in recent times.

Section 2 of the paper focuses on theoretical understandings of play. Key conceptual theories relating to children's play and learning which have had most influence in ECCE are tracked from their historical origins to contemporary understandings. Section 2 also looks at time and space in play as well as considering equal opportunities in play.

In the third and final section of the paper, an attempt is made to provide a conceptual link between theory and practice by exploring the notion of the playing-learning child. This is achieved by examining possibilities for effective learning and development in the everyday experiences of babies, toddlers and young children. The concluding comments identify key messages from the research, examples and arguments presented.

¹ The *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

Section 1: Understandings of play in early childhood: children's and adults' perspectives

Play in children's lives in early childhood: multi-disciplinary perspectives

Since the time of the classic Greek philosophers, play has been considered the characteristic mode of behaviour of the young child, an expression of the natural spirit of childhood and thus a key defining feature of childhood (Fromberg and Bergen, 2006; Kleine, 1993; Mayall, 2002). No one definition of play can encompass all the views, perceptions, experiences and expectations that are connected with it. Nevertheless, there appears to be broad agreement amongst theorists coming from a range of disciplinary backgrounds that play can make an important contribution to children's development.

In contemporary Western society, play is viewed as offering a time and space for the separation of children from the adult world of work and a medium through which young children can make sense of, and feel at home in the world. An evolutionary and biological perspective proposed by play theorist Sutton-Smith suggests that play is *at first a kind of biological prelinguistic enactment with its own claims on human existence* (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 143). Capturing both the resilience of children in their environment, and the notion of play as a resource that continues to be of value throughout life, Sutton-Smith (ibid. p. 231) proposes that play can be understood as *a lifelong simulation of the key neonatal characteristics of unrealistic optimism, egocentricity and reactivity, all of which are guarantors of persistence in the face of adversity*.

A developmental perspective pays attention to signs of maturing, whether of children maturing or, of the maturing of play (Scarlett *et al.*, 2005). In this regard, Fromberg and Bergen (2006 p. xv) highlight what they describe as *the permeable nature of play as it interacts with, parallels, represents and integrates physical, social, emotional, aesthetic and cognitive experiences*. Ethnographic studies have illustrated that young human beings play in all societies (Schwartzman, 1978) although it is recognised that the types and forms of children's play and the amount of play varies depending upon age, gender, cultural contexts and ecological characteristics of the play settings (Armitage, 2005; Bloch and Pellegrini, 1989; Smith and Connolly, 1980; Sutton-Smith, 1997). An anthropological view of play views it as an activity in its own right, where the main motive for children to come together is 'to be where the action is', while researchers have explored questions such as *What is play in itself?* and *What does it mean for the player?* (James, 1998; Strandell, 2000).

A collaborative understanding of play proposed by three 'play advocacy' organisations in the United Kingdom and adopted as underpinning Ireland's *National Play Policy* (2004) captures these multiple perspectives:

Children's play is freely chosen personally directed behaviour, motivated from within by needs, wants and desires. Play can be fun or serious. Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. By playing children learn and develop as individuals, and as members of the community (National Playing Fields Association, PLAYLINK and the Children's Play Council (2000, p.6 cited in *Ready Steady Play! A National Play Policy*, National Children's Office, 2004).

Over the past 50 years or so, the predominant site of children's free play has moved from public space on the street, to semi-public space such as separate public playgrounds, school yards and ECCE settings. Indeed, the play space for many children has most expanded indoors, in particular, within their own bedrooms where indoor play technologies such as television, video, DVDs, game consoles and computer games have proliferated (Buckingham, 2000). The indoor virtual play landscape of electronic media is sometimes perceived as providing a safe and authentic playing option at a time when children's independent mobility outdoors has been curtailed and 'playing outside' is lamented as a diminishing possibility. Virtual play is also promoted as offering adventure, freedom, mental and imaginative activity, in a space where players can navigate within networks (Kane, 2005). A number of questions arise however. Qualitatively, electronic or virtual play is very different from all other forms of play, whose essence is captured in interactions between players and the physical world (Scarlett, *et al.*, 2005). Virtual play, on the other hand involves playing in

a non-tactile, non-organic, non-sensual world, disembedded from physical space and a concrete sense of community, where the 'real' world is distorted and new worlds are created (Kane, 2005; Louv, 2005; Scarlett, *et al.*, 2005). Other important issues arising relate to concerns about the risks to which children are being exposed while accessing the internet; the extent to which electronic play promotes violence; and how play and technology influences family and parent-child relationships. Given the undeniably significant role technology plays in contemporary living, as well as its benefits to society as a whole, a measured and balanced approach to play and technology is advocated. Used appropriately with children, and not as a replacement to the first hand, direct, multi-sensory experiences offered by other forms of play, technology has been demonstrated to enhance young children's cognitive and social abilities (NAEYC, 1996). Assistive technology can also play an important role in the successful inclusion of young children with additional needs into ECCE settings as well as supporting their learning and development.

When David Elkind first wrote his seminal text *The Hurried Child* in response to what he then perceived as the increasing societal pressure on children to grow up quickly and the consequential stress on children, he concluded that *in the end, a childhood is the most basic right of children* (Elkind, 1981). In 2007, 25 years later, commenting on the greater appreciation of the importance of free, self-initiated, and spontaneous play to the child's healthy, mental, emotional and social development, he stresses that, *in the end, a playful childhood [emphasis added] is the most basic right of childhood* (Elkind, 2007. p. xvii).

The conceptualisation of play as childhood *right* has been enshrined within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) since 1989. The stated intention of the UNCRC with respect to play and recreation is to assure to all the world's children the benefit of a satisfying play life (Brown and Freeman, 2001). The UNCRC has been instrumental both nationally and internationally (David, 1996; National Children's Office, 2004; Shier, 1995) as governments worldwide are placed under a legal and moral obligation to advance the cause of implementing the rights outlined in the Convention, including the right to play (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, United Nations Children's Fund and Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2006). Contemporaneously, the notion of 'play deprivation' is gaining currency (Hughes, 2003; Louv, 2005; Pellegrini, 2005) particularly as it applies in the early childhood years. Initially the focus of play deprivation studies was on examining the impact of depriving children of physical exercise type play in view of the fact the body's muscle and skeletal systems are especially in need of exercise during childhood. Reviewing a series of such studies Pellegrini (2005) concludes firstly, that when children are deprived of opportunities to exercise, they over-compensate, or rebound when given the opportunity. Secondly, this need seems to be greater for boys than for girls. More recently, chronic play deprivation, particularly during the period between birth and seven years, has been linked to impaired brain development, lack of social skills, depression and aggression (Hughes, 2003).

Key point

Viewing play as a fundamental need and right of all children, and central to their well-being offers a powerful construct with which to legitimise and secure the place of play in the lives of young children at home, in ECCE settings and in public spaces.

Children's priorities in their play

Increasingly it is recognised that a secure pedagogy of play needs to include a thorough understanding of the meaning of play activities from the perspectives of the participants (Goncu and Gaskins, 2006; Wood, 2004). When asked about their play activities, children talk about the importance of having fun, being with friends, choosing freely and being outdoors (Bondavalli, Mori and Vecchi, 1993; Clark and Moss, 2001; Manners, 2003; Sutton-Smith, 1997; The Children's Society, 2007). Children in their first year of life enjoy exploring the immediate environment in the security of being held, which provides physical warmth and security. Observations of children under three years old at play indicate that they are uncomfortable with wide-open spaces, preferring small-scale spaces and the presence of a nurturing adult close by. As they are close to the ground often sitting and crawling on it, details in the ground that are responsive to their exploratory urges are very important (Hendricks, 2001; Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003; Nabhan and Trimble, 1994; Rinaldi, 1998).

Three to six-year-olds prioritised play when consulted about their preferences in ECCE settings in studies conducted in a number of European countries. When asked about their favourite places in an early childhood setting in London outside places were mentioned most frequently by the three to five-year-old children consulted in Clark and Moss' study (2001). A study conducted in Sweden, asked five-year-old children, *what would you like to do in pre-school if you could decide this by yourself?* Most of the children interviewed answered without hesitation *Play!* Some refined this by saying *play with friends* and many emphasised that they preferred to play outside. The five and six-year-olds interviewed by Einarsdottir (2005) in an Icelandic kindergarten similarly prioritised play - particularly play with friends, with open-ended materials, and playing outdoors. National and international studies indicate that children at the transition from early to middle childhood years value free-time and the spontaneity and freedom of play outdoors in contrast to the predominant character of their school day which they view as being under adult control and surveillance (Corsaro, 2005; Devine, 2002, Mayall, 2002; Mac Dougall, *et al.*, 2004; Manners, 2003).

A number of recent Irish studies of children's experiences in ECCE provide further insight into children's perspectives regarding the place of play in their lives. The documented accounts of children's play in a wide range of informal ECCE settings throughout the country reported in *The Power of Play* (IPPA, The Early Childhood Organisation, 2004), suggests that the following are children's key priorities:

- Construction play: especially when children are provided with a variety of open-ended materials
- Creating small spaces
- Transporting
- Playing with water
- Engaging with 'real' work, using real tools often engaging whole body movement
- Re-enacting social, and culturally valued activities through role play
- Being actively involved in story-telling
- Being creative when provided with a wide range of open-ended materials
- Having a sensitive adult close by who values play and who can offer support at key moments.

A further important message indirectly conveyed in this publication is the fun, excitement and energy in play. This is apparent not only for the children but also for key adults, early years practitioners and parents, who are able to tune into children's play scripts and 'go with the flow' of the sometimes unpredictable routes of play.

A further Irish study offers an insight into the place of play within children's experience of transition from pre-school to school (O'Kane and Hayes, 2007). When asked about their favourite things at school, the majority of the responses of the Junior Infant pupils interviewed in the case study school where the research is being undertaken², related to play, and in particular free play. The children identified this form of play as taking place on Friday mornings and they distinguished this from work, the activity they viewed as engaging most of their time in school. The amount of time they could engage in play, and the amount of available play equipment outdoors were viewed as two of the primary markers distinguishing their experience at pre-school from their experiences at school.

A study conducted by Kernan (2006) focussed on one to five-year-old children's experience of play outdoors in four very diverse ECCE settings in Dublin - a workplace crèche, a day-nursery, a community playgroup and a junior infant classroom in an Infant school. By analysing photographic and observational evidence, coupled with conversations with children, it was possible to identify clear patterns across all four settings in terms of what was important to children in their play. These can be summarised under overlapping and connected categories of experience (see Table 1 below), many of which mirror the forms of play highlighted in the IPPA's *The Power of Play* (2004) referred to earlier.

² The study, which is ongoing, combines a single case study with nationwide questionnaire completed by early years practitioners (O'Kane and Hayes, 2007).

Table 1: Children’s priorities in their outdoor play experiences

Main category	Illustrative examples
Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Opportunities for expansive movement, speed ■ Opportunities for practising newly acquired physical skills (sometimes alone) ■ Transporting self or materials using vehicles and tools ■ Moving in and out, indoors to outdoors to indoors
Vertical expansiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Being high up (on slopes, steps, raised platforms, climbing equipment, trees and slides) ■ Sights and sounds overhead
Finding and constructing small spaces	<p>Small spaces to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ with friends in small groups ■ to be apart from the crowd ■ to observe at a distance ■ to hide, or be enclosed
Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Multi-sensory exploration of nature elements (especially water) ■ Finding loose parts, transforming physical environment with loose parts ■ House building
Direct contact with animals, insects and plant life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Time to observe animals, insects, plant life ■ Support by adults to name, to understand, to touch, to care for animal and plant life
Social experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Playing with friends, affiliation and co-operation ■ Significant adults being involved in playful interaction and shared interest in discoveries.

The focus of this part of the paper has been to identify key experiences in play that appear to be most significant from young children’s perspectives. By combining these, with generalised features of children’s play identified by a range of play and childhood ‘experts’ it is possible to synthesise the most salient characteristics of play, which help to define its character, attitude, and disposition, in addition to capturing its appeal for children and its significance for their well-being during the early childhood years. Authors and texts drawn on in compiling the list of characteristics include: Bruce, 1996; Dockett and Fler, 2002; Garvey, 1977; Lieberman, 1977; Mac Naughton, 2003; Moorcock, 1998; Rogers and Sawyers, 1988; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Wood and Attfield, 2005. Table 2 presents nine characteristics of play that illustrate its complexity, variety as well as its sometimes paradoxical nature.

Children’s intrinsic motivation to play, whatever the social context or available materials, has always been, and continues to be, a key influencing factor in providing for play in ECCE. However, play is included in ECCE curricula not just because children like to play, but *also for its voluntary and experiential features (and) its importance for identity formation, expression and social learning* (Bennett, 2005, p.21). In the following section play is examined specifically within the context of ECCE in terms of its construction as a medium through which children learn and develop.

Key message

Increasingly it is recognised that a secure pedagogy of play needs to include a thorough understanding of the meaning of play activities from children’s perspectives.

Table 2: Characteristics of play

Characteristic	Description
Play's voluntary nature	Children will choose to play; they cannot be made to play; they may also choose not to be involved; sometimes they may change the direction of the play. The control of the play rests with the players: it belongs to them.
Play's meaningfulness to the players	Play reflects what children already know, have observed and can do. It provides the context for building and extending knowledge, skills and understandings in a way that makes sense to them.
Play is low risk	Children can experiment and be challenged in their play and yet cannot fail. In this sense, play provides a minimum of risks and penalties for mistakes. Play can also be linked to the possibilities of exploring risk - doing something you have never done before, something difficult or trying to do something better than you did the last time.
Play's spontaneity and openness to the surrounding world	Play offers an invitation to the possibilities inherent in things and events. This is often captured in the term 'playfulness', and associated spontaneity, curiosity, flexibility and creativity.
Play is symbolic	Children often pretend and imagine when they play. Play enables them: to transform reality into symbolic representations of the world; to experiment with the meanings and rules of serious life; to try out different ideas, feelings and relationships with people.
Play incorporates deep involvement and sustained concentration	Terms such as 'wallowing', 'flow', and feeling both capable and challenged are often associated with play, invoking the dominance of the means over the end; the process over the product; the sustained concentration that is often apparent when children play.
Play is active	Play involves activity of players. It may be physically active, involving active engagement with the physical environment or exuberant movement, and physical energy. It may also involve mental activity such as in imaginative play or play with words. Often both physical and mental activity will be involved.
Play's sociability	Children are often most satisfied when playing alongside or in co-operation with peers or adults. However, sometimes children prefer and need to play alone.
Joy, sense of humour and excitement	Children engage in play because it is enjoyable in and of itself. They derive pleasure when they draw on their own ideas, often shared with like-minded peers. However, play may not always be a positive experience. Sometimes, play can place a child at risk of being hurt, being called names or being excluded by others.

The ambiguity of play in early childhood care and education

For more than a century, play has held a rather idealised position within early childhood education. Inspired by the writings of pioneers of early education such as Friedrich Froebel (1782 - 1852), Rachel (1859 - 1917) and Margaret Mc Millan (1860-1931) and Maria Montessori (1870 - 1952), the notion of a natural, active, play-oriented child has been placed firmly at the centre of the early childhood curriculum. This has also been linked to the progressive 'child-centred' approach associated with the work of John Dewey (1859 - 1952). As noted by the authors of the British Education Research Association Special Interest Group on Early Childhood Education (BERA SIG) review of early years research, the ideals of progressivism were consistent with the 'play ethos' in respect to the emphasis on exploration, discovery, hands-on experience, child-initiated activity and the importance of choice, independence and control (BERA, SIG, 2003). Such ideals, particularly active exploration, discovery and hands-on learning, were also highlighted in the principles guiding *An Curaclam na Bunscoile (Primary School Curriculum)* published by the Department of Education in Ireland in 1971 and reiterated in the 1999 revised *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b).

Today, the maxim that 'children learn through play' continues to constitute pedagogical 'givens' in many early years settings (Anning, Cullen and Fleer, 2004). In such a discourse, play is primarily viewed as an instrument of learning and development but also as the means by which *children learn to be happy, and*

mentally healthy human beings (Cannella and Viruru, 1997, p. 124). According to Moyles (2004 p. 9), *play in educational settings should have learning consequences*. However, realising this in practice may not be as straightforward as the persistent ideology of play as ‘the work of childhood’ might suggest. Once one attempts to articulate an agreed pedagogy of play to describe play in practice, and to demonstrate its efficacy in terms of positive learning outcomes, the position of play as the main context for learning in ECCE settings becomes more problematic.

Understandings of play, or what counts as play vary enormously across different ECCE settings and is influenced by a range of factors including: historical and cultural traditions and values; dominant political discourses; whether services are located within the formal education sector or within the care sector; the age to which early childhood curricula or guidelines are targeted; as well as regulatory frameworks (Abbott, 2001; Ailwood, 2003; Blenkin and Kelly, 1997; Bennett, 2005). In Scandinavian countries, play is viewed both as early childhood content and method, the means through which children conceive and make sense of the world, feel in control, express their views, analyse experiences and solve problems. Here, children’s own culture, free play and friendship are afforded high status in early childhood education (Einarsdottir and Wagner, 2006). In contrast, in countries where the pre-primary or readiness for school model of ECCE dominates (Ireland and the UK have been cited as pertinent examples by Bennett, 2005), play tends to be curricularised with an associated need to identify specific purposes or functions of play in children’s learning and development which are often articulated in terms of specific academic subjects. In such contexts, the role of the adult is more directive than indicated in the Nordic model. For example, in the Irish Primary School Curriculum, in the Guidelines for Teachers for infant classes, the mediating role of the teacher in play in English within the strand ‘oral language’ is described as follows:

Given materials and contexts children will play spontaneously. However, if they are to experience the maximum learning from it the teacher must influence it and direct it (Department of Education and Science, 1999b, Teacher Guidelines: English, p.42).

The status of play in ECCE is closely related to the timing of the introduction to formal academic skills such as learning to read, to write and to count. The notion that ‘earlier is better’ in relation to the introduction of such skills has been linked to the downward curriculum pressure in schools emanating from governments’ needs for skilled workforces to meet the demands of increasingly competitive global economy. However, it is also linked to parental expectations (Elkind, 2007; Weikart, 1999). Research studies that have examined the effects of differential instructional approaches on young children’s achievement and motivation indicate that if a programme is overly-focussed on formal skills, it is more likely to provide opportunities for children to fail, generate higher anxiety levels and to develop a higher dependency on adults, promoting in children negative perceptions of their own competencies (Sylva and Nabuco, 1996; Stipek et. al 1995 cited in OECD, 2004). It has been suggested that such activities, may have little meaning for young children aside from the fact that success at them pleases their parents (Bettelheim, 1987).

Not surprisingly, the division between play and work and play and academic learning persists as a highly controversial construction in ECCE (Hayes, 2006; Pramling Samuelsson, 2004). Play can be viewed both as the natural vehicle by which young children learn (Anning and Edwards, 2006) and yet may be sidelined in favour of ‘work’ or used as a reward for ‘good’ work. In informal settings such as pre-school playgroups, play can be seen as preparatory to ‘real’ learning in ‘big school’. Once in school, play may not be taken seriously by parents or teachers (Wood and Attfield, 2005), except perhaps as a means of introducing elements of more formal education in an ‘interesting’ or novel way (Hayes, 2004).

Typically, in everyday practice in ECCE, play tends not to be planned in the way ‘serious’ academic work is planned (Pramling Samuelsson, 2004). Some of the features of play such as freedom, spontaneity, exuberance, fun and ownership do not always sit happily or naturally within an educational and prescriptive programme. In some contexts, these tend to be marginalised to the outdoor break, also viewed as the non-teaching, or ‘down tools’ time by adults, where a distinction is made between the outdoors as the arena for non-serious play or running about, recreation, or ‘letting off steam’ and indoors, as the arena for serious work and learning (quiet and sitting down) (Evans and Pellegrini, 1997; Pellegrini, 2005; Kernan, 2006). It is also proposed that play, especially free play, may be difficult to manage within educational contexts because play can change the nature of power relationships—the locus of control is with the children, rather than with the adult (Brown and Freeman, 2001; Wood and Attfield 2005).

One solution to overcoming the dichotomy between play and work and play and academic learning is to refocus attention away from arguing how play serves development to reformulating the playing/working child or playing/learning child where dispositions and processes common to both playing and learning or playing and working are identified (Karlsson Lohmander and Pramling Samuelsson, 2003; Wood and Attfield, 2005). The following elements have been identified as being important for both play and learning: creativity, ‘as if’, mindfulness, and possibility thinking (Pramling Samuelsson, 2004); practice, rehearsal, repetition, mastery and extension (Wood and Attfield, 2005). Arising from such an understanding of the playing-learning child is the responsibility of the early years practitioner to be able to see possibilities for play and learning everywhere in the environment. This challenges the adult to be both child-centred, allowing children keep freedom and self-direct their play and at the same time, be able, when appropriate to direct awareness to different objects, and phenomena in the environment (Pramling Samuelsson, 2004).

Key message

One solution to overcoming the dichotomy between play and work and play and academic learning is to refocus attention away from arguing how play serves development to reformulating the playing/working child or playing/learning child where dispositions and processes common to both playing and learning or playing and working are identified.

Considering the role of adults in children’s play

Whilst the tendency to play is universally acknowledged as being innate, increasingly it is recognised that in order for play to flourish as a truly enjoyable, cognitive, and socially adaptive human ability, adult support is necessary (Singer, 2006). Identifying the precise form and function of that support however, is not easy. In many cultures and communities, parents are young children’s first co-players (Rogoff, 2003). Referring to the importance of parents’ interest, enjoyment and involvement in their children’s play, Bettelheim (1987) notes that it makes a vast difference to the child and his play if he/she can share his/her experiences with an adult who is able to remember childhood experiences around the same kind of play. Patience and timing are critical in parent-child interactions in play. It is important for parents to provide the physical and mental space to children to play with ideas and materials in ways that are most meaningful to them [the children], and not impose their ideas [the parent’s ideas] regarding the ‘proper’ way to play (Bettelheim, 1987).

An important pre-supposition of an effective pedagogy of play suggests that early years practitioners can use their knowledge of the processes and content of children’s play to create content-rich environments that provide a wide range of play possibilities, which promote learning and development, are challenging, engender a feeling of security and wellbeing, and build a sense of community (Bruce, 1987; Hendricks, 2001; Rinaldi, 1998). A wide range of roles can be assigned to the early years practitioner in relation to supporting children’s play in ECCE settings including: play architect, designer, manager, orchestrator; organiser, resourcer, observer, assessor, facilitator, mediator, co-player, scaffolder, trainer and advocate (Bruce, 1996; Dockett and Fleer, 2002; Jones and Reynolds, 1992).

Adults’ roles in children’s play can also be viewed as a continuum between indirect planning for play to direct involvement in the play. At one end of the continuum, adults adopt the role of manager as they organise the time, space and resources that promote play. When they mediate, or interpret the play that occurs, adults become more involved. Direct involvement occurs when adults adopt an active role in the play, when for example the adult engages in parallel play, co-playing or play tutoring (Dockett and Fleer, 2002). The task of the early years practitioner is to make judgements about the most suitable strategies to use based on the knowledge of the individual children, the particular context, whilst also taking account of broader moral, ethical and equity considerations.

Such a continuum of adult involvement in children’s play is evident in the findings of the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) and Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) studies in the UK. Amongst the characteristics associated with highly effective settings [those which led to positive outcomes for children aged three to seven years] included: adult and child involvement; cognitive (co-constructive) engagement and sustained shared thinking between adults and children; and the use of instruction techniques such as modelling and demonstration, explanation and questioning (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004).

Achieving positive outcomes for young children is dependent on the skills and competence of early years practitioners in a wide number of areas including: sound observational skills; an informed understanding of how children learn through play; being clear on the adult's role, including attention to the processes of play and learning as well as their outcomes (Hurst and Joseph, 1998; Siraj-Blatchford, 2005); awareness of the importance of timing and space considerations in play. It is also important to draw attention, as indicated in the EPPE/REPEY research cited above, that whilst much learning can be achieved through play, it is not the only pathway to learning for young children. Thus when planning a curriculum for young children, a key task for early years practitioners would seem to be creating a balance between giving children time and space to learn through their self-initiated play and providing learning which is more formally negotiated between the child and the adult (Hurst and Joseph, 1998).

Key message

Whilst the tendency to play is universally acknowledged as being innate, increasingly it is recognised that in order for play to flourish as a truly enjoyable, cognitive, and socially adaptive human ability, adult support is necessary. The precise nature of this involvement can be viewed as a continuum between indirect planning for play to direct involvement in the play.

The place of play in early childhood care and education discourses in Ireland: perspectives from policy and practice

In analysing the particular position of play in early childhood education discourses in Ireland, it is noteworthy that serious public policy attention to children's play has been a relatively recent phenomena compared to other countries (National Children's Office, 2004). However, the large number of reports and policy documents published in the broad field of early childhood since the mid-1990s suggests that much greater attention has been paid to early childhood in general in recent years, and with it, consideration of the place of play in young children's learning and development. A number of examples are now drawn upon to illustrate the shifting understandings of childhood play from a policy perspective.

Firstly let us return to the early 1970s and the ground-breaking 1971 *An Curaclam na Bunscoile (Primary School Curriculum)* which foregrounded the holistic and harmonious development of children, and the importance of activity and discovery methods within an integrated curriculum. This curriculum also highlighted the potential of play to enhance children's cognitive, linguistic, social and creative development. When these principles and approaches were revisited and elaborated in the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999), the view of the child as an active agent in his/her learning was particularly emphasised. However, in this respect play appears to hold a relatively marginalized position throughout. In the Introduction to the Curriculum, play is referred to in the context of children's sense of wonder and natural curiosity and in relation to the necessary informality of the learning experience within the curriculum for infant classes. An analysis of the curriculum content of the infant curriculum and the teacher guidelines revealed only a few references to play. When referred to, play is described as requiring teacher structure and direction in order to be beneficial. This might appear to be somewhat at odds with the vision of the child as an active agent in his/her learning underlying the curriculum.

1999 also saw the publication of a White Paper on Early Childhood Education entitled *Ready to Learn*. One of only two references to play was with respect to the recommendation that curricular guidelines should account for the need for structure and learning through play (Department of Education, 1999a, p. 56). The second specific mention to play was in the section addressing children with special needs and the need for both structured and unstructured approaches to play. A third Governmental report published in 1999, which referred to children's play, was the *National Childcare Strategy* authored by the Expert Working Group on Childcare under aegis of Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. Attention to the provision of opportunities to play was incorporated under 'Needs and Rights of Children', the first of five overall guiding principles underpinning the Strategy. This marked a shift in policy towards considering play, indoors and outdoors, as both a need and right of young children (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999). The positioning of play as childhood right at this juncture in Irish policy was largely due to the growing

impact of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) following its ratification by Ireland in 1992 as well as advocacy work by organisations in Ireland such as the Children's Rights Alliance. One year later Ireland's first National Children's Strategy *Our Children, Their Lives* (Department of Health and Children 2000) was published. Highlighted in its objectives are the need to support children's development and experience of childhood through quality early years services and the need to enhance the experience of childhood through access to play opportunities including play in public space, incorporating both natural and built environments.

An 'outsider' policy perspective of pedagogical practices in relation to play became available when the OECD *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland* was published in 2004. The reviewers' brief summation of the experience of play in ECCE in Ireland was highly critical. Regarding their observations in informal childcare settings, the authors remarked on the overabundance of ready-to-buy plastic toys, an emphasis on table top games, puzzles and work cards rather than on interactive, self-directed learning and a neglect of outdoor play provision. In junior infant classes in the primary school sector, the overall impression was of didactic, whole class teaching, with children sitting quietly at tables where play was often used as a means of delivering a curricular goal or a pre-academic skill. The authors also drew attention to the large group sizes and the absence of specific regulations for the training of teachers of the younger children, as well as for classroom design, organisation and equipment (OECD, 2004). It is important to note some infant classrooms are characterised by high adult to child ratios which can impact on the role of the teacher and the availability of opportunities for child-initiative, free play and peer interactions.

The impetus for the development of Ireland's first National Play Policy, *Ready Steady Play!* came from concern articulated forcefully by children regarding the lack of play opportunities in Ireland (National Children's Office, 2004). The overarching aim of the Play Policy was to improve the quality of life of children living in Ireland through the provision of more play opportunities. The play policy has resulted in a significant increase in the number of public play spaces available to children around the country. Although its prime focus is on public play opportunities, the Play Policy included attention to play in 'childcare' and 'school' settings in its four-year action plan. One of the 52 Actions of the policy was that the revised *Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations* would have a greater emphasis on the importance of play in child development. This action has now been realised with play being indirectly referenced in Article 5 of the revised *Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations 2006*. The article states that

A person carrying on a pre-school service shall ensure that each child's learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the service, through the provision of appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interaction, materials and equipment, and having regard to the age and stage of development of the child and the child's cultural context.

A second action states that the Department of Education and Science will request Boards of Management of Primary Schools to include a statement about the value of play and enhanced opportunities for play as part of their overall school plan. An action, described as 'ongoing' noted that teacher training would *continue to promote the benefits of play both in the schoolyard and in the classroom* (National Children's Office, 2003, p.59-60)³.

The *National Play Policy* and NCCA's ongoing task to develop a *National Framework for Early Learning*⁴ dovetailed the development of *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE, 2006). Play is one of the twelve principles underpinning the Quality Framework, which are translated into practice in the form of 16 Standards of Quality. Critically, each standard applies across all 'types' of early childhood provision and includes sessional services, full and part-time day care, infant classes and childminding. An understanding of play as central to young children's well-being, development and learning is once again reiterated and emphasised in this document, designed to guide all early years practitioners/childminders in the provision of quality services for young children.

³ In this regard, it is of note that no reference was made to the content of training of early years practitioners outside the formal school sector.

⁴ As noted earlier, *The Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

Thus, in the past decade, children's play moved from a relatively marginal position in State early childhood education policy to a place where it is, at least in aspiration, valued, supported and holding a prominent position in policy and practice guidelines in relation to ECCE provision within the diverse range of settings in Ireland. However, a key question arising concerns the gap between aspiration and action, between policy and practice, between vision and everyday reality. Such a 'gap' was identified by the National Economic Social Forum (NESF, 2005) as characterising ECCE policy activity in Ireland. Discontinuities between vision and reality also emerge in a small number of qualitative and quantitative studies with respect to everyday pedagogical practices in ECCE settings, both formal and informal. These provide valuable insight into day-to-day realities in ECCE settings in Ireland as well as highlighting the diverse understandings of play in pedagogical practices.

Based on a survey of IPPA membership working in a wide variety of types of informal ECCE, a key focus of Carswell's (2002) work was on early years practitioners' interpretation of play and learning⁵. The resulting explorative research paper noted two conflicting understandings of the playing/learning process and the adults' role in that process. On the one hand early years practitioners conceptualised play as the child's individual learning process whilst guided by adults who are aware of developmental milestones. On the other hand, early years practitioners described formal learning activities, or 'extrinsically motivated activity' which Carswell interpreted from responses as having the dual function of producing and inducing socially acceptable, culturally approved rules and norms. He comments on the 'fine line' between intrinsic motivation and external structuring of children's everyday play activities, noting the uncertain, complicated and ambiguous role of early years practitioners in the play process.

The purpose of Murphy's study (2006), also a questionnaire survey of early years practitioners⁶, was to gauge the extent to which the child-centred guidelines informing the two most recent Irish primary school curricula were being implemented in infant classroom practice. The respondents were all senior infant teachers and the average class size was 27 pupils (pupil to teacher ratios of respondent classes ranged from 14 to 1 to 36 to 1). Amongst the key findings was that whole-class, large-group, parallel instruction was being used 'frequently' or 'very frequently' by 85% of the surveyed teachers and just 22% of teachers indicated that they facilitated child-directed activities 'often' within their classrooms. Teachers also commented on the poor resources and the absence of basic play equipment in their classrooms. When asked to indicate how often they used structured and unstructured play activities, 61% responded that they used such approaches either 'frequently' or 'very frequently'.

The dominance of teacher directed activities noted in Murphy's results were similarly observed in the earlier IEA Preprimary Project, a large cross-national and observational study of the experiences of four-year olds in ECCE settings (Hayes, *et al.*, 1997). In a meta-analysis of the Irish findings from this study, relating to children's experiences in the 55 school settings included in the study, Hayes (2004) noted that most observations recorded children in activities selected by the teacher, with limited freedom to choose activities other than those suggested. Findings also indicated a low level of child-child or adult-child interactions with children mainly observed working silently. The average group size of the junior infant classes researched was 25. Adult: child ratios ranged from 1 to 11 to 1 to 34.

The focus of Kernan's study (2006) was on constructions of a 'good' childhood as enacted in the outdoor play experience in ECCE settings in urban environments in Ireland. Whilst it was possible to conclude from the wide-ranging data that there was a clear ideology linking the outdoors to the construction of a good childhood in theory, this was not viewed as possible in practice. Survey data, representing the experiences of 1,236 ECCE providers nationwide⁷ suggested that outdoor provision was very uneven in respect to both access and the diversity of physical environmental features present. A number of additional structural conditions were identified as militating against the actualisation of positive experiences outdoors in everyday

⁵ Analysis based on 180 completed questionnaires incorporating 6,644 qualitative responses (Carswell, 2002).

⁶ Analysis in this study was based on 186 completed questionnaires (Murphy, 2006).

⁷ The researcher collaborated with POBAL in the inclusion of a number of questions regarding outdoor provision in the 2005 Annual Beneficiary Questionnaire to recipients of Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme Funding (Kernan, 2006).

life both at home and in ECCE settings. One important factor was the negative perceptions of Irish weather and the tendency for adults to socialise young children to the view that it is preferable to be indoors unless it is mild and dry outdoors. A second factor emerging was the persistent influence of an historical educational tradition that has prioritised indoor teaching of 'the basics' (reading, writing and arithmetic) over learning and development outdoors. Related to both these were limitations on children's capacity to exercise choice and achieve a personal balance between indoors and outdoors. A further factor impacting on actualising positive experiences outdoors was the tension between children's need for exploration, challenge and risk and the pervasive litigation and car transport culture and heightened anxieties regarding children outdoors. Finally, the erosion of natural garden spaces where children can play outdoors was also identified as limiting outdoor experiences (Kernan, 2006).

The combined evidence from policy documentation and research on practice suggests that there is a mismatch between vision of best practice in ECCE in relation to play and current realities. In most current policy documentation play is prioritised as holding a central position in relation to supporting children's well-being, learning and development and therefore considered a key component in ECCE curricula. On the other hand a range of structural conditions, such as group sizes, restricted physical space, poor design and lack of resources, coupled with and interacting with pedagogical styles emphasising teacher direction, rather than child-initiative suggest that a coherent pedagogy of play may be currently absent in much ECCE provision in Ireland. A further important policy and practice issue which is commanding increased attention, is the extent to which all young children in Ireland, whatever their ability, ethnicity, language, socio-economic background, experience an equally satisfying play life which supports their well-being, learning and development. This issue is addressed in greater detail in Section 2 of this paper.

Key message

In the past decade, children's play has moved from a relatively marginal position in State early childhood education policy to a place where it is, at least in aspiration, valued, supported and holding a prominent position in policy and practice guidelines in relation to ECCE provision within the diverse range of settings in Ireland. However, a key question arising concerns the gap between aspiration and action, between policy and practice, between vision and everyday reality.

Section 2: Theorising play in early childhood

Researching the forms, functions and benefits of children's play

As a topic of academic study within the sciences, play has traditionally 'belonged' to developmental psychologists, and applied in practice, early childhood educators dominate (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Reflecting the influence of developmental psychology and child development on ECCE, the dominant pedagogical discourse includes references to 'play stages', 'growth', 'natural development', 'readiness' and 'needs' (Burman, 1994; Hartley, 1993; Woodrow, 1999). Within such a discourse, the progressive and universal nature of children's play is a powerful construct. Play is understood both to represent the quintessential child developmental activity (Newson and Newson, 1979; Pellegrini and Bjorklund, 1998) and as serving basic developmental functions (Sutton-Smith, 1994; Strandell, 2000). Rather than focussing on whether play causes developmental changes or whether developmental advances cause changes in play, increasingly these two understandings of play are merged to explore how developmental changes and play development interact to enhance both (Garner and Bergen, 2006).

Historical perspectives

Up to the mid-nineteenth century, ECCE services had been based on philosophical, spiritual and romantic ideals as in the Froebelian Kindergarten or the rational, moralising and civilising beliefs of the British Infant School. Industrialisation's need for labour also induced women to set up day-care provision for the youngest children of working mothers. By the end of the nineteenth century, these approaches to early childhood education began to draw on the emerging medical and psychological knowledge. Adults working with children whether early years practitioners, psychologists, social reformers, therapists, playground organisers, all used children's motivation to play to facilitate their own intentions and interventions (Kernan, 2005; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Critically, observing children at play came to be viewed as providing the adult investigator with insight into child competence in a number of areas (Pellegrini and Bjorklund, 1998). This function of play persists in ECCE. Play continues to be viewed as an important assessment tool whereby early years practitioners can gauge the interest, the level of understanding, the reasoning and social skills of individual children through skilled observation (Hayes, 2003). Observation during play also focuses early years practitioners' attention on the uniqueness of each child, including his/her experiences and interests and the extent to which these are being supported (Jones and Reynolds, 1992).

Inspired by Friedrich Froebel amongst others, Margaret McMillan's original nursery garden school established in London, was an expression of the idea of human growth and nurture and an ideal setting for young children (Steedman, 1990). In her book *The Nursery School* first published in 1919, McMillan provides detailed information regarding the specific role different elements of a nursery garden were perceived to have in the nurture and education of young children including sensory stimulation and opportunities for physically active play, and challenge. Sensory development and tasks requiring purposeful effort, work and challenge, both indoors and outdoors, were also valued by Maria Montessori in her vision for the education of the young child. A key aspect of her pedagogy was the prepared environment. The function of this multi-sensory, child-centred environment was to support a sense of independence and an awareness of the child's own ability to do things for him/her self, with as little direct help as possible from the adult (Montessori, 1998).

Between the 1930s and 1950s psychoanalytic ideas, represented initially in the work of Sigmund Freud, which emphasised children's emotional needs and natural development began to make an impact on ECCE (Burman, 1994). Child psychoanalysts, such as Melanie Klein and Anna Freud, viewed play's function as emotional expression and release. Susan Isaacs was particularly well known for adapting the psychoanalytic technique to the educational needs of children. She considered play essential for the healthy emotional development of children. At the beginning of the 21st century, play in child psychotherapy continues to be standard clinical practice whereby children use play to work through and master complex psychological difficulties of the past and present guided by a play therapist (Bettelheim, 1987; Russ, 2004). It has also been documented how children commandeer play when facing troubles such as illness or medical procedures, without the guidance of formal play therapy (Clarke, 2006)⁸. In emergency and conflict situations, play has been demonstrated to have an important role in supporting children recover from trauma (Engle, 2006).

⁸ Clarke (2006) uses the term *child-initiated therapeutic play* in this respect, to distinguish it from play therapy.

Key message

Rather than focussing on whether play causes developmental changes or whether developmental advances cause changes in play, increasingly these two understandings of play are merged to explore how developmental changes and play development interact to enhance both.

Describing the relationship between play, learning and development

Explaining play in terms of different types of play as well as researching play as an aid to cognitive, social and socio-linguistic development dominated developmental psychologists concerns for much of the 20th century. By the end of the century there were substantive claims for the value and significance of play in language and literacy learning (Roskos and Christie, 2000); emotional development (Erikson, 1963; Fein, 1985); social competence and peer group affiliation (Parten, 1932; Garvey, 1977; Giffin, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978); spatial and mathematical learning (Guha, 1988); and the development of positive learning dispositions and orientations (Lieberman, 1977; Sylva, Bruner and Genova, 1976). Parten's (1932) categorization of play in terms of progressive levels of social participation was significant because it emphasised the role of social interaction in play. However, in more recent times, Parten's formulation has been criticised for implying that playing alone was less advanced, and that older children engaging in solitary play were socially immature. She also underestimated very young children's ability to engage in social interaction and this has led to the erroneous view that babies and toddlers do not play 'properly' (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003).

Piaget's (1962) conceptualisation of play as developing in stages defined by qualitatively different levels of thinking and increased levels of knowledge was particularly influential in ECCE. His constructivist approach, which is summarised in the research paper *Children's early learning and development* (French, 2007) suggested a dialogue between the child's cognitive structures, internal rules for processing information, and the external world. His cognitive play theory, which focused on the individual's interaction with the environment has been attributed as the basis for a 'laissez-faire' free play curriculum, where children make the choices with the adult intervening as little as possible. This is often positioned in contrast to Vygotsky's social-cultural theory of development, which emphasised the role of adults and peers in development and learning (Smith, 1993).

Vygotsky argued that whilst play was not the predominant feature of childhood, it was a leading factor in development (Berk and Winsler, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). His attention was focused on the cognitive functioning and social rules involved in maintaining peer interaction in socio-dramatic play⁹. His elevation of socio-dramatic play, as the most valued form of play in early childhood has been hugely influential in early childhood pedagogy (Bodrova and Leong, 2005; Karlsson Lohmander and Pramling Samuelsson, 2003). His theoretical framework, incorporating the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP), challenged the efficacy of a free-play curriculum, and suggested that adults need to take an active role in stimulating learning in the context of play. However, this did not mean formal academic teaching. Rather learning was understood as taking place in interactions between children and adults, between peers and in the context of real-life everyday situations.

A typology of play considered useful in describing the different forms of children's play is that developed by Hutt, *et al.*, (1979/1989). Here, play is grouped into three categories: epistemic, ludic and games with rules. *Epistemic* play, typically associated with children in the first two years of life, refers to exploratory play with objects and materials whereby children gather knowledge about the world through their senses. *Ludic* play refers to children's imaginative, fantasy and socio-dramatic play i.e. 'what if' scenarios or pretence. In *games with rules*, children design their own games with negotiated rules and in time. They also partake in more conventional games with 'external' rules.

⁹ Vygotsky identified two critical features of pretend play that described its uniqueness. Firstly, all representational play creates an imaginary situation that permits children to grapple with unrealizable desires and so promote self-regulation. Secondly, play always contains rules for behaviour (Berk and Winsler, 1995).

Table 3: Hutt’s typology of play

PLAY				
EPISTEMIC BEHAVIOUR		GAMES WITH RULES	LUDIC BEHAVIOUR	
Problem solving		Co-operative	Symbolic	
Exploration		Games of chance	Representative object	Immaterial fantasy
		Games of skill	Fantasy object	Fantasy person roles
Productive		Competitive	Repetitive	Innovative
Materials	Acquisition of skills			Perserverative

(Hutt, (1979), as cited in *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, NCCA, 2004, p.45)

The prevailing approach to considering play in ECCE pedagogy throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s was to link the provision of different types of play to the principal domains of child development and to look for developmental progression or ‘signs of maturing’ within specific play behaviours. The notion of ‘developmentally appropriate practice’ (DAP) as set out in a document published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp and Copple, 1992) in the United States, was particularly influential and became a powerful construct in Western ECCE practice. (See French (2007) for further discussion). Play as an important vehicle for children’s all round development, as well as a reflection of their development is one of the key principles informing DAP (Nutbrown, 2006). Different forms of play incorporate cognitive, social, emotional, physical and moral challenges and support children to develop strengths in a range of areas. Table 4 summarises what are commonly viewed as the most salient forms of play in terms of the holistic development of the child. The NCCA’s *Framework for Early Learning* moves away from the earlier approach to linking the provision of different types of play to the principal domains of child development and to view the child instead as developing through four interconnected themes - Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking (NCCA 2004). Just as domains of children’s development are closely related and intertwined, so too, are the different forms of play. In practice, when children are playing, their behaviours may reflect more than one type of play identified above. Furthermore, children often display preferences for particular types of play. Importantly, the focus of the play is often not determined by age, but rather on the context in which play takes place a topic that is addressed in the following section.

Table 4: Key forms of play in early childhood

Exploratory play: using physical skills and sensations to learn about materials and their properties, what they feel like and what can be done with them.

Constructive play: the manipulation of objects and materials to build or create something using natural or manufactured materials such as blocks, playdough, junk and collage materials, sand and water. Involves creating, recognizing and solving problems.

Creative play: using open-ended materials such as art materials and natural materials in ways that encourage fluency, flexibility, originality imagination, embellishment and making novel connections.

Pretend, fantasy and socio-dramatic play: includes: role play, pretending with objects, pretend actions and situations, persistence within the imaginary play frame to create a play episode or event. When it involves interaction and verbal communication with one or more play partners regarding the play event it is termed socio-dramatic play (Monighan Nourot, 2006).

Physical locomotor play: activities that involve all kinds of physical movement for their own sake and enjoyment. In this type of play a range of fine or gross motor skills are practised and mastered.

Language or word play: unrehearsed and spontaneous manipulation of sounds, and words often with rhythmic and repetitive elements. As children get older, this kind of play often incorporates rhyme, word play and humour.

Towards a socio-cultural and ecological understanding of play in early childhood care and education

Beginning in the 1980s, a new awareness of the importance of interactional and reciprocal relations in human-environment interactions (Moore, 1985) developed. This coincided with the broader cultural context for learning and development (Hogan, 2005) emphasised in Vygotsky's work and highlighted in the research papers (French, 2007 and Hayes, 2007). Some psychologists also began to give attention to the play and developmental potential of different styles of play environments, indoors and outdoors (Heft, 1988; Moore, 1985; Smith and Connolly, 1980). Thus, a socio-ecological or cultural-ecological awareness began to enter consideration of children's experiences including their experiences of play. By the 1990s, there was also a growing acknowledgement that 'child development' (the body of theoretical knowledge and research description) reflected a minority of world childhoods based mainly on North American and European childhoods as studied from the perspectives of North American and European researchers (Woodhead, Faulkner and Littleton, 1998). Children have different experiences including different play experiences depending on their home, community, cultural and societal context.

The awareness of learning as a socio-dynamic process was highlighted by many including Bruner (1996) and Rogoff (1990). As noted in the research paper *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood* Hayes (2007) highlights that learning is a social process, and children from the very earliest, are active participants in the shared construction of knowledge. In this regard, Bronfenbrenner's influential Socio-cultural model and later Bio-ecological model of human development are useful frames of reference (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994) when describing mediating processes in everyday experiences in ECCE including play. These include: child and adult personal characteristics; reciprocal interactions between adult and child and between child and child; opportunities for group and solitary play; and the degree to which *objects and symbols in the immediate environment invites attention, exploration, manipulation, elaboration and imagination* (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998, p. 997).

Building on Vygotsky's work, Rogoff's socio-cultural view of development draws attention to the notion of children both shaping and being shaped by social and physical environments (Rogoff, 2003). Development is conceptualised as a process of transformation of participation in socio-cultural activities. One of the issues noted by Rogoff (2003) is that communities vary in expectations regarding whether parents serve as 'playmates' of young children. Thus, whilst it is typical in middle class European and European-American

and Chinese families for parents to act as toddlers' playmates or as conversational peers, this is not typical in other communities where siblings and other extended family members take on the role of playmates. Rogoff (2003) also draws attention to differences in themes in pretend play cross-culturally, remarking that in communities in which children participate in the 'mature life' of a community, they often play at adult work and social roles. Where children are segregated from the adult community, their play less commonly reflects 'mature activity' *rather children emulate what they have had a chance to observe, such as television superheroes or adult TV drama* (Rogoff, 2003, p. 299).

Coupled with the attention to children's interactions with others is a focus on children's interactions with the environment. In a 1985 article titled, *The state of the art in play environment*, Moore describes this shift in thinking as follows:

The 'environment' impinging on child development is not only physical or designed environment but also social and cultural; the child and the total socio-physical environment are united in a complex ecology. (Moore, 1985, p.172)

One useful concept, which has been utilised by researchers coming from an ecological perspective seeking to understand children's encounters in their everyday worlds is that of *affordance*. This concept is increasingly being utilised within ECCE research to describe the relationship between children and their environment. The term *affordance* was originally coined by perception psychologist James Gibson (1979) and explained as follows: *the affordances of the environment are what it offers [an individual] ... what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill* (Gibson, 1979, p. 127). Affordance implies the complementarity of the individual and the environment. It refers to the perceived and actual properties of physical resources in the environment (fixed features of physical structure, objects, tools) and how they are used. One of the first researchers to utilise Gibson's concept of affordance in describing children's encounters with the physical environment was Heft (1988). He proposed a functional taxonomy of children's outdoor environments, which subsequently became influential amongst some play environment designers and researchers. Heft's taxonomy comprised 10 categories as follows: 1. Flat relatively smooth surface; 2. Relatively smooth slope; 3. Graspable/detached object; 4. Attached object; 5. Non rigid, attached object; 6. Climbable feature; 7. Aperture (admitting light); 8. Shelter; 9. Moldable material (e.g. dirt, sand); 10. Water. Each category was further defined in terms of its affordances. For example 'Shelter' affords: microclimate, prospect, refuge, privacy. Moldable material affords construction of objects, pouring, modification of its surface features. The value of such an approach was that it offered a way of thinking about environments that was fundamentally active and goal directed (Heft, 1988) and which supported children's activity, curiosity, exploration and creativity.

One application of the concept of affordance has been the recommendation from designers and educators to include pieces of playground equipment or materials that have more than one affordance (van Liempd, 1999). This concept is often linked to play value (Jacobs and Moore, 2002) and playability and the importance of open-ended materials. A more recent focus of interest has been to examine affordances in the context of the socio-cultural world, including the analysis of the diversity of potential affordances available to children in different contexts and the degree to which they are actualised, or promoted or constrained [by adults] (Kernan, 2006; Kytta, 2002, 2004; Reed, 1996). These have particular relevance for the experience of play in the ECCE settings and will be revisited in Section 3 of the paper.

Whilst the notion of play as a universal activity of childhood still holds, this is qualified with reference to the fact that important variations occur in children's play as a function of economic, social and cultural structure of communities in which children live and the affordances of the physical environments available to children in their everyday lives. A key question arising from this analysis is the extent to which all children, whatever their gender, colour, ethnicity, ability have an equally satisfying play life within ECCE settings. This topic is now addressed by examining play in the context of diversity and equal opportunities.

Key message

Whilst the notion of play as a universal activity of childhood still holds, this is qualified with reference to the fact that important variations occur in children's play as a function of economic, social and cultural structure of communities in which children live and the affordances of the physical environments available to children in their everyday lives.

Equality of opportunity in play

A diversity and equity approach to ECCE is based on the principles of inclusiveness (everyone belongs) and an appreciation of and respect for the origins of all (van Keulen, 2004). A number of general key issues have been identified as warranting attention when reflecting on the meaning of such an approach in everyday practice in ECCE. Firstly, areas of 'difference', such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background are fundamental parts of children's identity and have a significant impact on their experiential life including their experience of play. Secondly, the early years is a time when children are actively constructing images of themselves by comparing and contrasting themselves to others in their immediate everyday environments such as the home and the ECCE setting. This process is also influenced by the views of significant adults in their lives as well as media images and children's own observations. Thirdly, all children are receptive to positive and negative behaviours including misinformation and stereotypes about certain groups. Fourthly, the first time young children come across diversity in society is often in an ECCE setting. Therefore, it is important for early years practitioners to keep to the fore that diversity, equal opportunities and inclusion are not just minority issues, but affect the majority and therefore are important issues for all ECCE settings (Mac Naughton, 2003; Murray and O'Doherty, 2001; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004).

A number of researchers in the field have drawn attention to the power every adult has to affect (for good or bad) the self-identity, behaviour, actions, understandings, and beliefs of the children they interact with (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Nutbrown, 1996; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004). Good practice in equal opportunities in ECCE indicates a proactive role for early years practitioners with respect to diversity and children's play (Derman-Sparks, 1989; French, 2003; Nutbrown, 1996). This involves reflecting all children's backgrounds and abilities in the design, resourcing and images displayed in ECCE environments; actively supporting bi/multilingualism; being non-judgemental, and valuing a range of family forms, cultures and child-rearing practices, guiding children's developing attitudes and empowering them to stand up for themselves and others, and to feel proud of their own identity; supporting their sense of belonging through their experiences of play; carefully challenging and acting on discriminatory remarks and actions (Dickins and Denzeloe, 1998; Mac Naughton, 2003; Murray and O'Doherty, 2001; Nutbrown, 1996).

This places to the fore the moral and ethical dimensions of pedagogical work, which is often absent from discussions regarding the role of the early years practitioner (Brown and Freeman, 2001). Providing a slightly different perspective on the role of the adult in children's play, with particular focus on reflecting on the moral implications of adults creating play spaces, mediating disputes, allocating resources and permitting or forbidding aggressive, sexual or exclusionary activities, Brown and Freeman (2001) pose the following questions which are useful when thinking about sharing power amongst the stakeholders in a ECCE setting:

- Can children decide how long, with whom or what to play?
- How do adults enforce their own perceptions of what is "right" when they determine what children ought or ought not to do?
- How should adults equip and organise early years settings?
- How do adults respond when their version of what is appropriate is at odds with children's interests and inclinations? (Brown and Freeman, 2001).

When addressing moral, ethical or equity issues as they arise in planning for and evaluating children's play, there is general agreement that a key starting point is the importance of early years practitioners reflecting on their own personal values, as well as the professional values of the organisation or setting where they work. The policies of ECCE settings with regard to play and equal opportunities need deliberate and careful consideration, and should not be explained in terms of 'that's the way it's always been done' (Brown and Freeman, 2001). There also needs to be on-going monitoring and regular evaluation (French, 2003).

In illustrating some of the above issues as they might arise in day-to-day practice in ECCE settings, three areas of diversity which have direct influence on the experience of play are discussed briefly: gender; culture and ethnicity; and ability. Whilst discussed in separate subsections, these are not viewed as mutually exclusive categories. In reality, beliefs and values about gender, culture and ethnicity, and ability frequently intersect in play (Mac Naughton, 1998).

Key message

A diversity and equity approach to ECCE is based on the principles of inclusiveness (everyone belongs) and an appreciation of and respect for the origins of all.

Boys and girls playing

In the first two years of life, there is little evidence that children choose playmates or have play preferences on the basis of gender. The separation of boys and girls into social groupings and specific patterns of play begins at around three years of age (Pellegrini, 2005). Between the ages of three and six years same sex groups or dyads increasingly constitute the context within which children's social experience occurs (Maccoby, 1998). With the emergence of pretend or fantasy play, gender differences are evident in the dominance of domestic and nurturing themes and co-operative role taking in girl's play and the preference of boys for a world of superheroes or themes associated with danger, dominance, fighting or competition (Holland, 2003b; Maccoby, 1998). Furthermore, whereas girls avoid physically active behaviours in order to interact, boys are stimulated to high levels of activity by other boys (Maccoby, 1998; Pellegrini, 2005).

Such gender differences in play behaviours and play preferences can be explained by a complex interplay of biological and social factors. One biological explanation is that overall; boys are more active relative to girls (Pellegrini, 2005). It has also been suggested that there is some degree of prenatal hormonal priming involved in boys' greater propensity towards more physical and aggressive like play (Maccoby, 1998). Additionally, from a very early age children are learning gender stereotypes. That is, they are learning the cultural standards and practices regarding the behaviour of the two sexes and how society expects them to behave. From their pre-school years children will *attempt to adapt themselves to these standards and practices by behaving in 'sex-appropriate' ways* (Maccoby, 1998, p. 182).

One form of play where 'gender' differences have been observed to be to the fore is rough and tumble play. Rough and tumble play is closely related to play fighting and superhero play. The peak frequency of such play occurs at around four years and is more common amongst boys. It is characterised by high-energy behaviours and exaggerated movements such as running, chasing, fleeing, or wrestling. Critically, the intent is playful and not aggressive and it can be identified by smiles or a 'play face' (Maccoby, 1998). Rough and tumble, war, weapon and superhero play are often the source of controversy in ECCE settings (in English speaking cultures) because of their association with aggression, anti-social behaviours and general disruption (Holland, 2003a; Brown and Freeman, 2001). Furthermore, it is suggested that there is a link between the dominant feminisation of ECCE and an inherent bias in favour of girls' indoor, socio-dramatic play and against the boys' greater physicality, super-hero and outdoor play preferences (Bilton, 2002; Holland, 2003a; Reid, 2004; Sutton-Smith, 1994). One response to addressing the feminisation of ECCE and its inherent bias to indoor, sedentary, quiet, social play, is to ensure that both socio-dramatic play and construction play opportunities are available and supported indoors and outdoors (Bilton, 2002; Holland, 2003b; Perry, 2001).

Whilst research indicates that gender stereotyping appears remarkably resistant to change by early childhood programmes (MacNaughton, 2006), it is important for early years practitioners and parents to realise that the development of gender identity is an active process. An important task for key adults in young children lives as recommended in the Anti-bias Curriculum (Derman-Sparks, 1989) is to support children's understanding that being a boy or girl depends on anatomy and not what they like to do or wear. Boys and girls need to be provided with and supported to take part in a number of different types of play. The curriculum (*ibid*) also highlights the need to support girls to understand that they can be competent in all areas, and to support boys to feel competent without feeling and acting superior to girls. The wisdom of forcing 'underground' overt expressions of sexuality, gender and ethnic identity, aggression, power and mastery that are often part of play themes in early childhood has also been questioned. As noted by Brown and Freeman (2001), *when this play is hidden from view children miss the opportunity to seek adults' support or feedback to help them to make sense of it or the feelings it elicits* (p. 268).

Key message

It is important for early years practitioners and parents to realise that the development of gender identity is an active process.

Culture and ethnic diversity

Research cited earlier has drawn attention to the importance of considering cultural context when considering the differing styles of play engaged in by children coming from different ethnic backgrounds. Applying middle-class English language or European Western values and understandings of play when providing for and assessing the play of non-Western children or Traveller children may lead to a deficit view of the play of children and lead to children not feeling valued or not having a sense of belonging. The following issues have been highlighted as being important for early years practitioners in planning for play for all children and ensuring that individual children's existing expertise and cultural experiences in play can be further developed (Dockett and Fler, 2002):

1. *Move beyond Western theories of play for analysing play*
2. *Note the range of expression of pretend play evident across cultures*
3. *Determine the value play has for particular cultural groups prior to planning*
4. *Develop programs which recognise and support different cultural or multi-cultural approaches to play*
5. *Observe play in terms of culture and gender and deconstruct interactional patterns together with children and their families to ensure equity for all children (Fler, 1997, cited in Dockett and Fler, 2002, p.129).*

A number of practical planning, resourcing and everyday pedagogical practices can contribute to ensuring equality of opportunity in play including: provision of kitchen implements from different ethnic groups in the dramatic play/home corner; ensuring dolls and small people figures include men and women from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds; talking about children's skin, hair, eye colour and hair texture; regularly reading appealing picture books that depict gender, racial, ethnic and physical ability diversity; encouraging children to use their home language in the ECCE setting whenever they are so inclined¹⁰. Adults need to pay particular attention to supporting the communicative strategies of children whose first language is neither English nor Irish.

Key message

It is important to consider cultural context when considering the differing styles of play engaged in by children coming from different ethnic backgrounds.

Diversity in ability

Children demonstrate a wide range of skills, abilities, knowledge and understanding and all have the right to engage in play experiences. There is general agreement in the literature that in order for young children with disabilities to access play in ECCE settings, the focus should be on what children can do, their strengths and their potential, rather than what they cannot do. A second general principle is the importance of focussing on adapting or changing the activity, rather than on trying to change disabled children to fit into an existing programme (Dickins and Denziloe, 1998; Noonan and McCormick, 2006; Odom, 2002).

If children with disabilities are relaxed and valued in a setting, they are more likely to engage in and initiate and sustain play (Sayeed and Guerin, 2000). Early years practitioners' expectations and attitudes are important and can affect the process of the play experience including the adult-child relationship and child-child relationships. In an inclusive setting the aim should be, wherever possible, to make the usual range of play and learning opportunities offered indoors and outdoors accessible to disabled children (Dickins and Denziloe, 1998; Odom, 2002), ensuring that they have freedom and opportunity to explore, to create, to take risks, to make choices, to accept challenge and to develop friendships (Sayeed and Guerin, 2000).

¹⁰ Derman-Sparks (1989), French (2003) and Murray and O'Doherty (2001) all provide more extensive guidelines on this topic.

Modifications and adaptations to the environment/activity do not necessarily require enormous expense. In fact the advice is that they should be kept as simple as possible and should only be changed to the extent that is absolutely necessary to accomplish the desired purpose. Amongst the practical considerations addressed by Noonan and McCormick (2006) for children with limited motor abilities and/or health impairments include: the optimal positioning of all activities to allow children to relax, to focus attention on the activity and sufficient controlled movement for independent functioning; incorporate items that are large, and easy to grasp in the dramatic play area; provide a variety of surfaces for painting¹¹. Clearly, the best way to develop inclusive play is to consider the particular strengths and needs of the individual children in an ECCE setting. At all times, it is also important to display positive images [in play materials, books, posters] of disabled adults and children in the ECCE environment participating fully in everyday life (Dickins and Denziloe, 1998). It is also important to note that delays in children's development may impact on their ability to play. This may require the adult to adjust his/her interaction strategies and/or provide greater levels of support and perhaps for longer periods of time.

Exceptionally able children also relish in the freedom play offers, and the sense of satisfaction they can gain from pursuing something that is of interest and relevance to them in ways they can control (Dockett and Fler, 2002). However, sometimes the play interests of exceptionally able children may be different to their peers in an ECCE setting. This can result in frustration. Early years practitioners are cautioned against assuming that children are unable to interact appropriately with peers, when they observe them to seek the company of older children to play with, or engage in solitary play (Dockett and Fler, 2002). Rather than assuming that young children who are exceptionally able may not need to play, because their interests appear to be serious or academic, it is important to recognise what can be gained within play experiences. For the exceptionally able child, play may offer the opportunity to test hypotheses, to express and generate creativity, to develop mastery, and to explore complex issues not usually associated with the early childhood years (Dockett and Fler, 2002).

Good early years practice in ECCE requires adults paying attention to both commonalities and similarities within a group as well as acknowledging differences. It is based on an understanding that all children can fulfil their common need and right to play, and ECCE settings have the responsibility of meeting this need and right in different ways, all of which work for and are meaningful for children (van Keulen, 2004).

Key message

Children demonstrate a wide range of skills, abilities, knowledge and understanding and all have the right to engage in quality play experiences.

¹¹ More extensive practical guidelines for making play environments accessible to children with disabilities in ECCE settings are available in Dickins and Denziloe (1998).

Considering time and space in planning for play

The preceding paragraphs have highlighted how the combined and interacting forces in a child's physical and social environment influence how a child plays (Scarlett, *et al.*, 2005). In this sense, play is not simply the child's world but it is also influenced by what is promoted or constrained by adults, which in turn is influenced by the complexities of the social and cultural worlds that children inhabit. In the context of everyday experiences within ECCE settings, such a conceptualisation of play relates closely to the complex, interconnected and often contested dimensions of time, space and place. Age and changes in the material or biological body increases access to space (Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg, 1990; Newson and Newson, 1976). The rhythms of young children's daily lives, in particular access to time and space, are often dictated by the rhythms of adult's lives, the workplace, and transport systems (Ennew, 1994) and institutional time incorporating regulatory time frames (James, *et al.*, 1998). This includes the temporal flow or rhythms of children's play activities. In this regard, a number of researchers, as well as key policy documents and curricula have emphasised the importance of early years practitioners tuning into and respecting the rhythms of children's play and activity in ECCE settings (Bruce, 1996; David, Gooch, Powell and Abbott, 2002; Moss and Petrie, 2002). This involves providing a predictable, but flexible daily routine; allowing sufficient time for play to develop; protecting time and space so children can return to, repeat and extend play projects; being aware that there are individual differences in children's rhythms of play; and that play may differ in form at different times of the day.

Increasingly, geographical and related perspectives such as architecture and landscape design and environmental psychology are also being applied in designing ECCE settings focussing attention on the design of spaces for children (Burgard, 2000; Dudek, 2001; Greenman, 2005; Gulløv, 2003; National Children's Nurseries Association, 2002). One of the outcomes of this has been both a theoretical and practical interest in the notion of space, 'placeness' and belonging with regard to children's experiences in settings (Liden, 2003; Moss and Petrie, 2002). Aspects of design first highlighted by Montessori and revisited in the Reggio Emilia approach to ECCE include the interconnectedness between the indoors and the outdoors; the importance for children to feel in harmony with the environment outside the school and to be aware of the changes taking place there (Ceppi and Zini, 1998).

Different pedagogical approaches to ECCE for example; High/Scope, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Steiner-Waldorf emphasise different aspects of the design of the space and the organisation of resources and materials within the space according to the particular 'vision' of the approach. Whatever the pedagogical orientation being followed, whether the service is home-based, community-based, private or public, it is important that the arrangement of space is in tune with the pedagogical vision of the setting as the closer the match, the higher the quality of the ECCE setting (van Liempd and Hockstra, 2007). Talking about the space can generate discussion about an individual ECCE setting's pedagogical vision. Points of reflection and discussion might include the following (adapted from van Liempd and Hockstra, 2007):

- Is it important for groups of same age children to have a separate secure base/room? What is the desired level of interaction between children of different age groups and how does the space layout facilitate this?
- Are there distinct spaces for different kinds of activities?
- How are different play activity areas connected?
- Can children see other activity areas and move independently from one to another?
- Can children move independently from indoors to outdoors?
- Are there sufficient different play/activity areas indoors and outdoors for the numbers of children keeping in mind children's preference to play in small groups (two to five children)?
- Is there sufficient challenge and diversity in play activities provided indoors and outdoors?
- Are there possibilities for privacy?
- Is there a balance between quiet and 'busy' or noisy areas?
- Is it considered important to be able to bring materials and resources from indoors to the outdoors and from the outdoors indoors and how do the design, layout and resources support this if desired?

- Can children easily find and independently access a wide range of materials and equipment?
- How might boundaries and pathways between play areas support children's play?

The design of an ECCE setting is more than a collection of activity spaces. Colour, natural light, acoustics, aesthetics, furnishing, entrance area, how the children's work and activity is documented and displayed, orientation and connectedness to the community and the surrounding built and natural landscape, all communicate messages about the particular vision of an ECCE setting and need careful consideration from the perspective of all the users of an ECCE: children, parents and early years practitioners (French, 2003; NCNA, 2002; van Liempd and Hoekstra, 2007).

For play to develop and be a satisfying experience, children need to feel safe and secure. Ensuring that spaces where children play are safe is a fundamental principle of good practice in ECCE (French, 2003) and early years practitioners should never lose sight of their responsibilities to always, without exception, assure the safety of the children in their care. A number of writers have pointed to the fact that ECCE settings are however, being constrained by increased regulation of children's play environments where fear of insurance claims, litigation and meeting the requirements of the regulatory authorities appear to be overriding concerns (Adams, 2006; Factor, 2004). Moss (2005) analyses the tendency to increasingly regulate young children's activities within the context of a broader regulatory trend that has become stronger in the last 30 years as the world has come to seem more threatening and competitive, less orderly and controllable. One consequence of the increased emphasis on the avoidance of risk is to limit *the very sorts of experiences long held to be part of a healthy and happy early childhood* (New, Mardell and Robinson, 2005). Meeting children's need for risk is also complicated in settings that cater for children in a wide age range. What may be physically challenging, interesting and risky for a two-year-old, may not provide four-year-olds with sufficiently satisfying or physically challenging experiences.

The principal approach taken seems to be to demonstrate how risk-taking is a developmental necessity i.e. essential to growing up, a natural part of being a child, and related to encountering the unknown, feelings of competency, gaining confidence, and independence (Greenman, 2005; Moorcock, 1998; Smith, 1998; Stephenson, 2003). This further suggests an ethic of responsibility for discerning the risks that children ought to take. The IPPA's publication, *Nurture through nature: promoting outdoor play for young children* (IPPA, 2006) illustrates this powerfully through the 'learning stories' (Carr, 2001) of a range of children attending different kinds of ECCE settings in Ireland. This book also illustrates how effective real and natural materials and inexpensive junk materials can be in play and learning. As noted in the conclusion of the book, it is about 'seeing possibilities' everywhere in the environment (IPPA, 2006, p.60). This applies to children, parents and early years practitioners, as well as architects, town planners and policy makers.

The predominant discourse in ECCE at the beginning of 21st century views children as active participants in their own learning where the importance of a sense of belonging and connectedness to their world is emphasised, and where children and adults co-exist in interdependent relations (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Dunne, 2005; Moss and Petrie, 2002). This marks an important shift in the understanding of the role of the adult in ECCE from passive carer, or reproducer of knowledge to co-constructor of knowledge where adults and children's ongoing interdependent learning and playfulness in daily practice is important. In the final part of the paper, aspects of this interdependent relationship as it may be envisioned in everyday pedagogical play with babies, toddlers and young children are elaborated.

Key message

Attention needs to be given to the concepts and experiences of time, space and place as they have an important bearing on the quality of children's play.

Section 3: A pedagogy of play: strengthening the relationship between play and effective learning and development

This part of the paper is loosely structured according to the three over-lapping age related phases of early childhood identified in the *Framework for Early Learning*: babies (birth to 18 months); toddlers (12 months to three years); young children (two and a half to six years). It also keeps to the fore the four complementary themes that provide a framework for NCCA's conceptualisation of early learning: Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; Exploring and Thinking. Rather than attempting to provide an overview of all possible types of play as they are applicable in each phase of childhood, the paper focuses on raising issues for consideration within the context of selected play content and processes indoors and outdoors to illustrate the relational aspects of play and learning through the lens of the playing-learning child connected to and interdependent with significant adults in their lives.

Revisiting the role of the adult

As a starting point, let us revisit the person and the work of the early years practitioner as it relates to the key issues arising in Parts 1 and 2 of the paper. In day-to-day practice the professional work of early years practitioners entails: thinking about, planning and engaging in respectful interactions and everyday learning experiences and activities with children; designing and resourcing physical environments, indoors and outdoors; observing children at play; organising time and space for play to develop; evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of the experiences provided in terms of positive outcomes for all children; engaging with families, the community and the wider environment. It is also important to underline the fact that early years practitioners do not operate alone, in a vacuum or in context free situations. ECCE staff quality is nested within larger workforce systems, such as policy and organisational support (Weiss, 2005), teamwork and the provision of time and space for early years practitioners to critically reflect on their own experiences and values (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003). Additionally, as emphasised in the NCCA's consultative document (2004), supportive and trusting relationships between parents and early years practitioners are particularly important in the early years. All of these factors impact on the experience of play and positive outcomes for children.

Key message

Adults have an important role in supporting children's play.

Providing a secure base for babies and toddlers to play and learn

A useful formulation of the play of babies and toddlers utilised by Manning-Morton and Thorp (2003) is in the form of three groups of fundamental questions, which capture babies' and toddlers' motivation to make sense of the world. The first of these relate to the 'Sense of I': *Who am I? How does my body work? Who might I be?* The second group of questions captures the sense of reaching out and interacting with the other: *Who are you?; How are we the same and different?; What can we do together?* The third group invokes babies and toddler's instinctive curiosity and drive to explore their surrounding physical world: *What is it? What does it do? What can I do with it?*

Babies' intrinsic motivation to understand is supported by the physical and emotional availability of trusted and familiar adults. Such a role appears to be more critical at this point in the lifespan than at any other period. Often it is conceptualised as providing a 'secure base' for the playing, exploring baby and toddler. Manning-Morton and Thorp (2003) explain the notion of a 'secure base' in terms of creating *an ambiance that supports the child in their task of integrating their need to feel safe in the protected sphere of intimate relationships with their need for carefree unrestricted exploration* (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003, p. 23). In the early years of life there is a tension between what is old and new or between the security, familiar and

safe, and adventuring outwards to what is novel, or represents freedom, facilitating growth and development and a sense of connectedness and belonging to the world (Nabhan and Trimble, 1994; Tuan, 1977). A key message would seem to be that both are required if babies and toddlers are to thrive.

A further dimension to the adult's role as a 'secure base' as applied in the context of an effective pedagogy of play is the ability to be attuned to babies and toddlers motivation to play. Often this requires adults to be able to 'read' the body language of a baby communicating his/her desire to play, to explore or perhaps his/her need to feel secure. Clearly, play episodes occur throughout the day, and may be embedded in routine caregiving and are often unplanned. A desire to play may be indicated by looking out and pointing, crawling away, climbing, running, jumping, hiding, whilst a need for security may be indicated by searching, reaching up, hugging, clinging, approaching, following (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003)¹². Tuning into babies' and toddler's perceptions of their world is also about adults engaging or appreciating the 'newness' of childhood experience of the environment (Ward, 1978) and the capacity for sensory experience that is dulled for adults by familiarity (Tuan, 1974).

Given the importance of a 'secure base' in the form of a trusted and emotionally available early years practitioner it is not surprising that the most important piece of play 'equipment' in an ECCE setting is often described as the early years practitioner her/himself (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003; Garner and Bergen, 2006). This is vividly illustrated in the importance of playful face-to-face exchanges of vocalisation between baby and adult, one following the cues of the other, imitating and turn-taking. Babies themselves promote the continuation of playful communication by grins, mouth movements, hand waving and squeals of delight (Lindon, 2001). This kind of play often takes place during not necessarily planned moments throughout the day, typically as the baby sits on the adult's lap, is having his/her nappy changed, or is being dressed (Bergen, Reid and Torelli, 2001). Such turn-taking play is highly significant for social interaction and communication at the period in a child's life before verbal skills have developed. Given the opportunity to lie side by side with same aged peers or slightly older babies, young babies have also been demonstrated to engage in early communicative turn-taking behaviours (Goldschmied and Selleck, 1996). Such experiences of imitating and being imitated can also foster babies and toddlers perception of his or her connectedness with the other (Scarlett, *et al.*, 2005).

The classic game of 'Peek-a-boo' initiated and repeated by the adult whereby something disappears and then reappears has also been identified as a key early form of play requiring support and playful involvement and focussed attention of the adult. The significance of this form of play has been variously interpreted as supporting children's developing understanding of object permanence and allowing babies and toddlers to play in a safe way with the scary prospect of their carer disappearing, and having some control over how long the separation lasts (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003). Other forms of play where adults and babies operate as play partners include give and take games or point and name games (Garner and Bergen, 2006).

Playful interaction between adult and baby as the baby sits on adult's lap is also an opportunity for early interactive physical play and playing with motion. Many babies enjoy the exciting movement of being lifted in the air, and being swung slowly downwards again. Indeed, the opportunity to move perhaps best captures the essence of play for babies and toddlers. Not to provide opportunities and support for physical play *works against the interests of babies and toddlers and undermines their efforts to explore their world* (Manning-Morton and Thorp, p. 52).

As a general truism, it is possible to say, that when they are non-mobile, babies depend on adults to bring the world to them and them to the world. This also applies for many children with sensory impairments or physical disabilities. In addition to facilitating movement as in the early physical play referred to above, this is also demonstrated in the necessity of adults providing responsive, varied, novel objects and materials within babies reach so that they can explore them with their whole bodies – hand, feet, skin, and mouths. The onus is also on the adult to carefully observe how they use the materials and plan experiences and activities to practise skills and explore ideas further (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1996; Hayes, 2003). Much research

¹² Positive or negative affect visible in facial expressions provide further important clues which can be read by an observant and 'tuned in' adult.

has focussed on the developmental sequence and increasing complexity of play with objects in the first two years of life particularly as it relates to cognitive development such as making inferences based on first hand experience with objects. In the early months of life this sort of play is focussed on the baby's own body when they repeat over and over again motor behaviours that cause interesting things to occur. Then the focus shifts to objects and people external to the body as babies begin to achieve the ability to reach out, bang and grasp objects, let go. This further develops, with the ability to sit upright, to use both hands independently, examine objects and combine action patterns, firstly randomly (e.g. placing a spoon on a truck) and then combine in relational patterns such as 'placing a spoon in a pot, and then placing a lid on top. Once the so named 'pincer grasp' is refined (between 8 and 12 months), a favourite activity is poking fingers into holes, picking up minuscule objects from the floor and using toys they can activate by a poke (Garner and Bergen, 2006).

In recent years there has been renewed interest in babies and toddlers right to experience the outdoors in their daily life in ECCE settings recognising that they can thrive in their encounters with the outdoors. One focus of interest in this regard is the benefits to young children of exposure to air outdoors and exuberant physical activity in terms of their general health and well-being (Penn, 2005). For example, the following are listed amongst the benefits of outdoor play for babies and toddlers in the High/Scope curriculum (French and Murphy, 2005):

- Air temperature changes improve children's ability to adapt to cold and heat.
- Cool and colder air improves appetite and energises people of all ages.
- Exercise and fresh air support children's natural rhythms of sleep and wakefulness.
- Cooler, outdoor air generally contains more moisture and is easier on the body's airways and immune system than drier heated indoor air.
- Outdoor play provides a relaxing alternative to crowded living conditions.

Such an understanding of play outdoors was prominent amongst a range of adults (parents, early years practitioners, pre-school officers) interviewed in Kernan's study of the experience of the outdoors. Being outdoors, or having been outdoors, babies and toddlers were observed to be 'happier' and 'in better form'. Some adults also commented on the relationship between time outdoors and improved appetite and sleeping patterns and greater resilience to illness (Kernan, 2006).

Non-mobile and newly mobile babies whether in home or ECCE settings are dependent on adults to be prepared to take them outdoors, to stay close by and support their interest in natural phenomena. Nature outdoors, filled with interesting things close at hand can be a soothing place of refuge for babies in the company of attentive adults (Nabhan and Trimble, 1994). Also important is adult responsiveness in supporting children's sensorial exploration in their eagerness to understand. In this regard, joint naming is identified as important in attaching significance and meaning to objects and new experiences (David, *et al.*, 2002; Reed, 1996). A different level of contact with the outdoors is possible if babies are carried to a window by an adult where they might jointly point and share interest in a phenomena or object of interest which might be raindrops on the window, a passing dog or police car (David, *et al.*, 2002; Kernan, 2006).

Key message

The most important piece of play 'equipment' in an ECCE setting is often described as the early years practitioner her/himself.

The need to go somewhere, find out how people and things work: the play of toddlers

In her theory of perceptual learning E.J. Gibson proposed that perception underlies knowledge of the world (Gibson and Pick, 2000). As children grow and develop their perceptual learning increasingly reflects a deliberate and organised exploration of the environment. This is hugely facilitated by three gains in movement during the first year of life: 1. postural control - the ability to maintain upright orientation to

environment, 2. locomotion – the ability to manoeuvre through space, 3. manual control – the ability to manipulate objects. Describing the significance of these achievements Gibson and Pick (2000) write: *upright locomotion demands virtuoso control of equilibrium of the whole body and at the same time opens up the world for exploration of its useful offerings and its geography* (p. 48). Noting that while the achievement of locomotion is a significant change in development in itself, Gibson and Pick (p. 103) also remark that *the real excitement belongs to infants themselves* since babies are highly motivated to ‘go somewhere’. By the end of the first year, a great deal of play relates to developing physical and locomotion skills for which babies exhibit great enthusiasm. When they have the opportunities to explore, risk, and try and try again in an environment that is both safe and challenging, babies can engage in motor practice play that leads to advanced physical abilities, mobility, agility, dexterity, and as a result, confidence, independence and learning. Often their growing competence in walking, running and jumping provide the focus for playful activity (Lindon, 2001).

As the developing and growing child’s abilities change with time, so too will the possibilities for action with respect to the environment (Tudge, *et al.*, 1997). Crawling children and toddlers are challenged by variations in terrain; thus the floorscape and small changes of levels in steps and curves are of great interest to these newly mobile children. In this regard, the principles of importance of experience on diverse ground surfaces, as well as slopes and steps, structures for climbing, on, over and under, accessible materials, low windows, and direct access between the indoors and outdoors have been applied in a range of documents outlining good design and pedagogical practice indoors and outdoors for babies and toddlers (Bergen, Reid and Torelli, 2001; Manning Morton and Thorp, 2003; High/Scope Educational Foundation, 2003). The play environment for under two’s should provide challenge, and freedom to move and explore. In designing room layouts it is important to consider pathways and boundaries. The provision of clear boundaries between interest areas and clear paths of movement help children focus on play. Boundaries should also be low enough for children to view play possibilities, whilst at the same time have a degree of privacy. Low boundaries also allow adults view the whole area (Bergen, Reid and Torelli, 2001).

Stephenson’s observations of children’s outdoor play in a New Zealand full-day early childhood centre revealed a particular passion of one-year olds for outdoor play. She describes how these newly mobile children were particularly determined to be outside where physical challenges such as negotiation of steps, transporting materials, running, managing to make the bike move, climbing into a swing were approached with determination (Stephenson, 1999). Similar interests were observed by Kernan (2006) in her study based in ECCE settings in Dublin. Here too, the one and two year olds enjoyed moving independently between the indoors and outdoors. As well as the experience of being in the outdoor space alone undisturbed by the older children they enjoyed the active involvement of the early years practitioners in playful interactions - throwing, catching and rolling large balls. A key finding of this study was the observation that environments that induced positive affect and interest in children across the early childhood years often had a similar impact on adults. Outdoors, an interdependent relationship was evident where both children and adults benefited in company and interaction with each other. This was particularly apparent when adults were willing to engage in playful, adventurous activity, were in tune with what was fun and interesting for children, and were able to perceive affordances from children’s perspectives (Kernan, 2006).

By the time they are about two years old, toddlers are often described as more physically active than any other time of life and their interest in large motor activities increases. Once mobile, they also encounter objects, places and events as one among many mobile people – with the consequential realisation that others have needs, plans and desires too (Reed, 1996, p. 138). With increasing age, and language abilities toddlers and young children are also more likely to engage in social play with peers. In the following paragraphs we discuss the realm of the social, as experienced in play, with particular attention focussed on pretence, socio-dramatic play and friendships.

Key message

As the developing and growing toddler’s abilities change with time, so too will the possibilities for action with respect to the environment, and the play environment for under two’s should provide challenge, and freedom to move and explore.

Let's pretend: the play of young children

Pretend play, or fantasy play emerges in the second year of life, and it is generally considered to peak between three and five years (Rubin, Fein and Vanderburg, 1983). It has been characterised as being part of a package of symbolic abilities, which include self-awareness, theory of mind and language (Smith, 2006). Unlike other forms of play, it is generally regarded as being uniquely human.

As previously discussed in Parts 1 and 2, socio-dramatic play draws upon children's capacities for constructing meaning, framing stories, and making sense of their worlds in ways that enrich the development of the individual and the group simultaneously. It is viewed as incorporating a broad range of physical, cognitive, social, emotional and moral characteristics as well as including spontaneity and improvisation. The complex learning involved has been identified as incorporating sophisticated social or meta-communicative skills such as language skills, perspective taking, representational thinking, problem solving, turn taking, and the ability to interpret environmental cues, while at the same time retaining an autonomous, child-directed focus (Garvey, 1977; Giffin, 1984; Perry, 2001).

It is important for early years practitioners not to underestimate the importance of such play in terms of social connectivity, children's friendships, and their ability to make and maintain friendships over a period. Much research has demonstrated the centrality of peer relationships and friendships for young children (Dunn, 1993; Paley, 1992). Research has also highlighted the importance of peer play and socio-dramatic play as a key means of supporting the socio-cognitive processes involved in social well-being and adjustment (Dunn, 1993). Interviews with four and five year-old children regarding their experience in ECCE settings in Dublin, suggested that the need for affiliation with their (same sex) peers was hugely important to the children (Kernan, 2006). A major task for these children in the Junior Infant classes was developing the social skills required to be included in play during yard time.

What then, is the role of the early years practitioner in supporting peer relationships, and the complex skills required in maintaining pretend play with others? As previously discussed a number of educators and researchers in the field distinguish between, on the one hand, the provision of indirect scaffolds or supports for play in the environment such as providing adequate space and enough time, and the appropriate kinds and amounts of materials, equipment and play props (Bruce, 1996; Giffin, 1984; Perry, 2001; Jones and Reynolds, 1992; Van Hoorn, *et al.*, 1993) and on the other hand, more direct support involving early years practitioners guiding play enactments, helping elaborating fantasy, helping with access strategies, encouraging creative activities such as telling stories, dancing and singing songs with children, making models, drawings and paintings (Bruce, 1996; Paley, 1992). Socio-dramatic play has also been identified as an important pathway to literacy development. According to Christie (2006) if literacy enriched settings, adequate time and facilitative teacher involvement are in place, socio-dramatic play can function as an ideal medium for children to construct their own knowledge about literacy, since its '*low -risk' atmosphere encourages experimentation with emergent forms of reading and writing* (Christie, 2006, p. 185).

In all cases what is required is that the early years practitioner is a skilled observer, listener and interpreter of the children's play, and respectful of their feelings, intellect, language and culture (Monighan Nourot, 2006; Paley, 2004). The complexity and responsibility involved is captured in the following reflection from Monighan Nourot (2006) regarding early years practitioner influences on sociodramatic play which is termed 'orchestrating' children's play,

Teachers may well ask themselves if strategies such as providing a well-chosen prop, suggesting an additional role, or helping sustain play by entering the pretend frame will foster a more inclusive play event. Alternatively, establishing a rule such as, "You can't say you can't play," also requires the teacher to be a keen observer and active participant in helping children expand and elaborate their play scripts and in helping to sustain their play. Perhaps there are times when the highly engaged play of one group of children needs to be protected and would-be interlopers guided to create new play events. In each situation, the teacher's understanding of children's histories, the developing peer culture of the classroom, and children's feelings and ideas call for an interpretive stance...the artistry of play orchestration is alive in each moment of its creation. (Monighan Nourot, 2006, p. 97)

The ECCE setting may represent the first exposure to a public arena for many young children (Dunn, 1993). For children attending crèches, or day nurseries who typically spend longer hours daily in an ECCE setting, than would be typical in a pre-school playgroup or a junior infant classroom, it is also important that early years practitioners respect their right to be alone or in very small groups or pairs. In seeking places to be apart, young children may be dealing with felt crowdedness in a group setting (Greenman, 2005; Olds, 1988). Small spaces, or 'hidey holes' have been conceptualised as being nest like, offering comfort, seclusion or time out (Nabhan and Trimble, 1994), meeting the need 'to see without being seen' (Kirkby, 1989), where children can chose play partners and themes in the private spaces of childhood (Brown and Freeman, 2001). With the support of the early years practitioner, they can be created by toddlers and young children indoors and outdoors by removing themselves alone or in small groups under tables, in cupboards, behind curtains, on platforms, in shrubs, under slides, or in containers such as boxes. Here, they can remove themselves from adult's view while having adults at a secure distance. Importantly, by being supported to create their own hidey-holes or home corners children experience greater ownership of the space. In general, young children prefer small groups and friendship and imaginative play is more common in small groups than in large ones. Therefore, simply providing more adults without limiting group size is unwise (Smith and Connolly, 1980).

The importance of pathways, and boundaries between different kinds of play spaces indoors and outdoors, referred to earlier with respect to toddlers is equally applicable when designing spaces for young children. Spatial and design considerations for supporting play indoors and outdoors referred to earlier also include: consideration of private and group activities; thinking about adjacent areas which permit cross fertilisation of ideas/themes; flexibility e.g. movability of furniture; transformability of materials; providing the possibilities of being 'high up'; making possible the experience of playful experiences in and with nature. Ultimately, the aim is to provide diverse and interesting physical play spaces that are safe, which encourage all children to play, and which allow them freedom to develop their play (Bruce, 1996).

Children do not outgrow the need to negotiate, compromise and co-operate when they leave the ECCE setting behind. The social skills mastered during socio-dramatic play may be generalised to peer interactions in non-play activities, as well as in games with more complex overt rules of behaviour, which become more common in middle childhood. In this respect play serves as an arena in which children can progressively master the social skills they need to experience a positive sense of belonging to their peer group and in so doing, develop their sense of fairness and what makes for 'good' or indeed 'bad' play (Scarlett, *et al.*, 2005). Children now spend less time with adults and more time with same sex peers both at school and in their free time. The balance between freedom and adult control in play also comes to the fore in this age range. As previously noted ideal play spaces are often private spaces, away from the adult gaze, wild and unstructured spaces, away from traffic and bullies, where children may continue to engage in imaginative play. Thus at the transition between early childhood and middle childhood play continues to be a serious behaviour to be respected and nurtured rather than controlled.

Key message

It is important for early years practitioners not to underestimate the importance of socio-dramatic play. It draws upon children's capacities for constructing meaning, framing stories, and making sense of their worlds in ways that enrich the development of the individual and the group simultaneously.

Concluding comments

This paper has raised many issues of consideration when thinking about the place of play in ECCE. It has uncovered the complexity and multi-faceted dimensions of play and learning in the early childhood years. In making play a central part of an ECCE curriculum and an important part of the children's daily experiences, early years practitioners need to be able to articulate the rationale for their decisions in ensuring that all children derive benefit from their play experiences in ECCE settings. Drawing from a broad multi-disciplinary literature, this paper brings together a number of key concepts that serve to illuminate a pedagogy of play in everyday practice. These have relevance for all young children in Ireland in 2007 and all adults who have responsibilities towards children in home and in ECCE settings.

The paper points to the need to raise general awareness regarding the importance of play to children, its potential in supporting young children's well-being, learning and development and to the improvement of the provision of space and time to play indoors and outdoors in ECCE. This necessitates the co-ordination of a number of actions at different levels that encompass adults and the 'adult world' connecting with children's interests, their natural learning strategies and the promotion and actualisation of good design in spaces for children. A useful starting point is to raise awareness amongst the range of adult stakeholders who take decisions on behalf of children to engage with the 'newness' of childhood experience, the capacity and eagerness to explore, and the significance of the sensory experience to children in their response to their surrounding physical environment. This has implications for the training and for continuing professional development of all early years practitioners. One possibility is to encourage such adults to reflect back on their own childhood experience of play. A second important approach is to pay attention to observing how young children use the indoor and outdoor environment, how they perceive it, engage with it, and to listen to children regarding the value and meaning they put on their play experiences. An interdisciplinary approach in considering the role of play in young children's lives within initial training and continuing professional development in ECCE is also recommended. This will serve to ensure better understanding regarding the significance of play to children's general well-being, and the multitude of factors impacting on children's ability to carve out a satisfying play life. It will also help prepare early years practitioners for their advocacy role in ensuring equity in play opportunities. Ongoing, mentoring and 'expert' support is also required in supporting individual practicing early years practitioners and staff groups to reflect on, and improve pedagogical practices in relation to play for all children.

Improving access to, designing and organising indoor-outdoor ECCE play spaces which engage and interest all young children, requires collaborative effort between early years practitioners, children, parents and other 'stakeholders' such as regulators, school management boards/committees, urban planners, architects and landscape designers. A recent strategy to promote good design in spaces for children in the Netherlands was the organisation of competitions in architecture in ECCE. It is recommended that ECCE organisations and County Childcare Committees consider a similar strategy. Additionally, it is recommended that design workshops are made available involving collaborative input from a range of disciplinary, and professional perspectives, which address planning, designing and evaluating spaces for children, as well as strategies for including the perspectives of children, parents and communities.

Finally, it is important to underline the responsibility of national and local government to guarantee the material conditions so that young children's entitlements to 'good' play are a reality.

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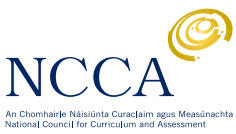
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National Council
for Curriculum and Assessment
24 Merrion Square
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177
Fax: +353 1 661 7180
E-Mail: info@ncca.ie
Website: www.ncca.ie