Celebrating the individuality of young children: Participatory assessment through child-led imaginary play in Reception Class

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A B S T R A C T

Practitioners in Reception Classes are required to observe and assess children in order to record, understand and support each unique child's development to the fullest. The increasing education policy focus on numeracy and literacy teaching for four and five year-old children has been criticised however, for reducing time for child-led play which is widely acknowledged to be an appropriate and accurate way to observe and assess young children. Assessment frameworks are not designed to catch the 'essence' of who children are, however, the increasing emphasis on numeracy and literacy skills may arguably lead children being defined by their level of development in these areas at the expense of 'knowing' children in a broader sense. This small-scale, qualitative study aims to investigate 'joining in with child-led imaginary role-play' as an original observation method to explore the possibilities of discovering different aspects of two reception class children that might not be apparent through adult-led assessment. The study highlights the tensions and complexities of the 'knowledge' gained about children during observations. Voice recordings and field notes were taken during episodes of child-led play. The researcher experienced unexpected conflicts of roles at times which appeared to unsettle the autonomous nature of the play, however, the method allowed insights into the children's personalities and 'ways of being' during play and was a surprisingly meaningful relationship building arena based in shared humour and co-created playful meanings. This method may offer reflective food for thought for researchers and practitioners wishing to celebrate different aspects of children to those contained with developmental frameworks or generated by adult-led activities.

Introduction

Background
The findings for this piece of research are taken from a dissertation study exploring two areas a) joining in with imaginary role-play as a method of observation and b) rhizoanalysis as an alternative analysis tool in addition to the EYFS developmental framework (Early Years, 2012) to draw out multiple possible interpretations of the observations. This article focuses primarily on the first area and discusses the ideas behind the method of joining in with imaginary role-play, with reflections on how the method worked in practice as well as possible implications for Early Years practitioners and researchers.

The purpose of education and the role of self-confidence
Children arrive in reception classes equipped with differing skills and abilities with which to negotiate their first year of formal education. Research strongly indicates that the emotional well-being of young children; their general confidence in themselves as learners; self-concepts and sense of self-efficacy to succeed are factors that develop with experience (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Gardner and Feldman, 1998; Pajares, 1996; Babad, 2010; Phan, 2016) and are pivotal in their engagement and

achievement in school settings. The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) (DfE, 2017) promotes development across a range of areas (0-5 years) which ideally would allow all children to gain confidence in their own particular strengths and abilities. In support of this, Gardner's vision for education states that 'The single most important contribution education can make to a child's development is to help him towards a field where his talents suit him best, where he will be satisfied and competent.' (Gardner as cited in Goleman 1996, p. 37). Furthermore, the UNCRC article 29 states that: 'Children's education should develop each child's personality, talents and abilities to the fullest' (UN, 1989). It is perhaps plausible to suggest, therefore, that recognition and celebration of children's uniqueness provides fertile ground in which to begin to cultivate their positive self-concepts as learners.

Schools are micro-societies in which children not only learn academic knowledge and skills but also about their status and acceptability within the system (Babad, 2010). The current policy impetus moves increasingly towards higher levels of adult-led formal numeracy and literacy activities in reception class (DfE, 2018). Dubiel (2016) warns, however, that practitioner's priorities inadvertently teach children which skills are most highly prized and conversely which skills are not worthy of assessment, therefore potentially creating a hierarchy of desirable strengths and abilities. Evidence of this hierarchy is demonstrated through a teacher's differing body language towards high and low ability children (Babad, 2005) and the potential impact of low academic achievement on children's mental health in middle school (Panayiotou & Humphrey, 2017). Despite the EYFS (DfE, 2017) emphasis on the importance of warm supportive practitioner/child relationships, the EYFS (DfE, 2017) stipulates a ratio of one teaching adult to thirty children in reception aged four and five years-old. This may constitute a significant barrier to teachers having sufficient time to develop relationships that would enable them to 'know' children in all their diverse individualities and abilities. OFSTED (2017) unequivocally state the importance of reception year as the start of children's formal education. However, a context in which practitioners prioritise gaining high levels of assessment knowledge about children's numeracy and literacy skills compared to other areas of skill and aptitude raises the troubling question of what children are learning about their own sense of worth in this context. This additionally creates tension for practitioners who are driven to enable all children's uniqueness to be recognised and celebrated in support of their sense of self-worth and developmental potential at the very start of their formal educational.

Aims

This study aims to contribute to the debate about how methods of observation might offer other ways of 'knowing' children that are not led by predetermined adult learning objectives or agendas. It investigates 'joining in' with child-led imaginary role-play as an immersive participatory, child centred, relationship focussed observation technique. The study strives for social justice for children by broadening the scope of the observational method in pursuit of the celebration of all unique children.

Literature review

Social justice: celebrating all unique children equally
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children states that 'Children's education should develop each child's personality, talents and abilities to the fullest' (UN,1989: Article 29). Reception class represents children's first full-time year of school education in the UK (four and five year-olds), and is governed by the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) (DfE, 2017). Assessment is a key part of the practitioners' role and takes the form of ongoing formative assessments and an end of year summative assessment (DfE, 2019). Development Matters (DM) (Early Years, 2012) sets out 'expected' milestones of development from 0-5 years across a range of areas including numeracy, literacy, creative arts, an understanding of the world and the characteristics of effective learners. However, the current government places a greater emphasis on the formal teaching of numeracy and literacy (OFSTED, 2017). Ideally, assessments would be able to identify all children's unique abilities to enable practitioners to support every unique child's holistic development.

This literature review critically examines the impact that increased numeracy and literacy teaching and assessment, alongside adult-led observations and low adult/child ratios may have upon the realisation of the UNCRC's (UN, 1989) educational goals for all children. Firstly, the relationship of early year's policy and assessment to political agendas is discussed. Secondly, the role that assessment plays in children's understanding of prioritised subjects is explored (Dubiel, 2016); links are made between increased numeracy and literacy teaching and children's sense of well-being and self-efficacy as learners (Panayiotou and Humphrey, 2017). Thirdly, debate concerning young children's

natural inclination towards play and their understanding of the difference between 'work' and 'play' (McInnes, Howard, Crowley & Miles, 2013) is discussed in relation to the validity of assessment data that is gathered during adult led versus child-led activities. Finally, the balance between observations for the purpose of assessment against predetermined criteria (assessment frameworks) and observation for the purpose of 'knowing' children is discussed. With the latter objective in mind, child-led imaginary role-play is explored as an alternative, immersive observation arena for recognising aspects of children in a different context to those typically afforded to practitioners during adult-led activities.

Government agendas behind early years assessment frameworks

The Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2019) requires practitioners to spend time observing young children in order to assess their development against the criteria set out in a framework (Development Matters, Early Years, 2012) so that they can document progress and support future learning appropriately. It might be assumed that the framework contains all the information practitioners need to know to support each unique young child's learning, however the objectives of the authors of the frameworks, and their influence over what is contained, is a subject worth exploring. Educational institutions arguably normalise the values of educational policy writers by abiding by the policies that govern them (Apple, 2005). It has been argued that issues of future economic growth and global competitiveness exert increasing influence over educational policy in the UK and that the government's interest in education is weighted more towards an arena of future economic assurance than in individual children's self-fulfilment (Urban and Palli cited in Powel and Gooch, 2014; Granoulhac, 2018). There is evidence to suggest that this creates an uncomfortable conflict of interests for practitioners between what policy defines as the priorities of young children's education and what children might need to fulfil their potential as laid out by the UNCRC (UN, 1989).

From a Foucauldian (MacNaugthon, 2005) perspective it could be argued that DM (Development Matters, Early Years, 2012) is a framework of child development that has become 'the truth' of child development because of the power of the government's ability to endorse particular versions of development that are desirable in terms of the country's future economic goals. Furthermore, applying Deluezian thinking would suggest that understanding gained from only one sphere of knowledge will limit what can be seen (Adkins, 2015; Coleman and Ringrose, 2013). Consequently, assessments completed via a child development framework will arguably only allow the practitioner to 'see' features of development that the authors choose to include. For example, DM (Early Years, 2012) commits nine pages to numeracy and literacy compared to a combined four pages to 'creative movement', art and music. This might suggest that literacy and numeracy development is complex, and therefore requiring of more pages; whereas creative movement, art and music are developmentally 'simple', thus requiring fewer. Alternatively, there may well be more to know about art, music and creativity development, but the authors of the framework do not wish practitioners to focus on this and therefore do not include as much information. From this perspective it would appear to be entirely appropriate to question the extent that DM (Early Years, 2012) constrains the practitioner's view of what constitutes features of development that are worthy and meaningful foci for children's current and future lives.

The role of numeracy and literacy assessment in young children's self confidence

The impact on people's lives of leaving school with low attainment in numeracy and literacy cannot be ignored (See Bynner & Parsons, 1997 for large scale, longitudinal study) however the balance of the social experience that children have of education, and how this effects their confidence is equally important (Babad, 2010). Dubiel (2016) asserts that children learn to discern which skills are most highly valued by practitioners based upon the areas they are assessed in. Although assessment is broadly seen as necessary, Billington argues that direct assessments cannot avoid being 'interventions' (2006, p. 139) in children's lives and should be used sensitively, being mindful of any unintended consequences on children as a result of participation. Furthermore, academic achievement has been demonstrated to lead to decreased levels of warmth and emotional support for 'low achieving students' amongst teaching staff (Babad, 2005). The current UK government's firm commitment to raising standards in numeracy and literacy (DfE, 2018) by increasing the formal teaching focus for four and five year-olds (OFSTED, 2017) could arguably heighten young children's awareness of the prestige of numeracy and literacy skills above other areas of development. An assertion supported by a large scale DfE funded study finding a suggestive link between low academic attainment in numeracy and Literacy and negative internalising mental health symptoms in girls; a gendered tendency for girls to be concerned with pleasing parents and teachers is suggested to explain the

results (Panayiotou & Humphrey, 2017). Although research in this area is limited, Panayiotou and Humphrey (2017) argue that increasing academic pressure is a cause for concern for children's future mental health. This point is strenuously supported by 200 prominent education academics, politicians and practitioners in an open letter to the Telegraph newspaper; they raise the worrying possibility that a prevalence of numeracy and literacy 'is likely to cause profound damage to the self-image and learning dispositions of a generation of children' (Abbs et al, 2011).

Self-efficacy (a person's personal evaluation of their ability to complete a certain task) has been shown to negatively influence actual attainment if self-efficacy is low (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Pajares, 1996; Phan, 2016). Moreover, children's self-concepts are strongly informed by comparison with the attainment level of peers (Babad, 2010) despite Feldman's (Gardner and Feldman, 1998) assertion that there will always be variation in children's innate aptitude despite identical teaching. It could be hypothesised, therefore, that increased teaching of numeracy and literacy for children for whom literacy and numeracy are not areas of natural strength, could have the unintended consequence of increasing some children's negative self-concepts and thus undermining the capacity of schooling to positively impact their skills. Consequently, a depressing picture emerges of the potentially divisive capacity of numeracy and literacy attainment to 'define' children and impact their levels of confidence as learners and social inclusion. This situation prompts urgent questions of how practitioners can enable all children to see the worth of their unique strengths and abilities in order to develop equally positive self-concepts in their abilities.

Child-led versus adult-led observation

Practitioners, in reception class, assess their observations against the themes laid out in DM (Early Years, 2012). Although assessments can be adult-led, most 'will come from practitioners observing a child's self-initiated activities' (DFE, 2019, p. 13). In view of the arguments detailed above, child-led observation seems a highly appropriate assessment strategy as children's motivation to play is well supported in literature (Piaget, 1951; Smilansky & Shefayta, 1990; Lindqvist cited in Nillson, 2009; Vygotsky cited in Smidt, 2009; Moyles 2015). Children see play as a distinctly unique arena in which they have freedom from 'right or wrong' answers, as defined by adults (Sutton-Smith, 2001), and within which they are socially motivated to build and sustain friendships (Dunn, 2004; Rogers and Evans, 2008). However, it is argued that young children differentiate between 'work' and 'play' based on their comparative experiences of 'adult-led' versus freely chosen play, which negatively impacts their engagement during activities perceived as 'work' (Howard, 2002; McInnes et al, 2013; Georgeson & Payler, 2015). Furthermore, this may impact on the authenticity of assessments due to children's disinterest (Dubiel, 2016). This point is supported by the EYFS in asserting that assessments are more accurate 'where the attainment demonstrated is not dependent on overt adult support' (DfE, 2019, p. 11). Observations of child-led activities would appear to be an opportunity, therefore, for practitioners to explore authentic ways of assessing children to those afforded by adult-led activities.

Having explored the benefits of observation and assessment via child-led play, it is relevant to also consider factors that may influence the practitioner's ability to conduct assessments in this way. It is argued that the degree to which practitioners are able to commit time to assessment during child-led play may be negatively influenced by pressures to meet attainment targets higher up the school (Adams, Alexander, Drummond & Moyles, 2004; ATL, 2009) and more recently by Ofsted's (2017) recommendation of increased formal whole class teaching in reception class. Fierce opposition to this move has been seen in the press from educational researchers and professionals who are concerned that increased emphasis on formal teaching could leave much less time available for young children to play freely (KEYU, 2018; Berliner, 2018). By implication, this suggests fewer opportunities for practitioners to observe free play, potentially leading to an over-reliance on adult-led assessment which may, in turn, limit the opportunities to see aspects of children that might only be glimpsed during the creative absorption exhibited in freely chosen play. The need to assess children is not being disputed, nor is the importance of numeracy and literacy skills. However, policy appears to be increasingly prioritising adult-led numeracy and literacy teaching and assessment for young children at the expense of child-led play and open-ended observation that transcends pre-determined criteria in order to see and 'know' children beyond what the framework allows.

Child-led imaginary play- a rich assessment arena

Children's play can take different forms however, sociodramatic play is defined as differing from other forms of play in that it features imaginary role-play (Smilanski & Shefayta, 1990). Imaginary role-play is argued to include complex skills of symbolic representation and negotiation (Smilanski & Shefayta, 1990; Rogers & Evans 2008). Furthermore, communication, imagination and

social skills are practiced at the children's optimum ability in this arena, driven by their enjoyment and social motivation (Trawick- Smith 1998; Anderson, 2005; Rogers & Evans 2008; Vygotsky cited in Bodrova, 2008). For example, how a stick represents a telephone; how the voices, actions and gestures denote the roles; how the children's knowledge of the world is dramatised and embellished in new imaginings; and how the play is directed and elaborated from within by its players. Moyles validates the worth of assessing children via their play and argues that this method is a 'far more reliable and valid way of understanding their individual strengths and needs, albeit a very skilled and analytic process' (2015, p. 16). Accepting that imaginary play is both highly motivating for children and creatively constructed by them, it perhaps offers uniquely insightful opportunities to see the children drawing on different skills and abilities to those typically assessed during adult-led activities. Arguably, once untethered from the expectations of adults' learning objectives, imaginary play might also give insights into the themes and ideas the children are most motivated to explore in their play.

Participatory versus non-participatory observation

Communication during imaginary play undoubtedly takes place between the children but may be difficult to fully comprehend as a non-participant observer. Mehrabian (1972) argues that non-verbal communication plays a large part in our understanding of communication and encompasses facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice. Although Mehrabian's notorious finding that only 7% of communication is verbal has been criticised for being taken wildly out of context from the narrow concept of the original study (Lapakko, 1997), the significance of non-verbal cues in communication cannot be ignored (Ambady and Rosenthal, 1992). Therefore, a participant observer, in the act of joining in with play, may be privileged to experience the subtle nuances of children's less inhibited non-verbal communication and what this means within the play context. Additionally, adult-led activities, fuelled by learning agendas, arguably rely heavily on the practitioner's verbal input (instructions, guidance and so forth) whereas imaginary role-play potentially offers practitioners opportunities to relax their reliance on verbal cues and enjoy intuitive, responsive, relational interactions in which the children are equally motivated to spontaneously contribute.

The opposing side to this argument, however, suggests that the children will be equally susceptible to the adult's non-verbal cues. Findings from Birch, Akmal and Frampton's study suggest that children as young as two and three are capable of discerning someone's credibility when presented with new information gleaned 'from non-verbal cues of confidence or uncertainty…' (2010, p. 2). Consequently, Birch, Akmal & Frampton's (2010) study could imply that an insincere or unconfident adult player may be quickly perceived by the children as incongruent or fraudulent, thus disrupting the authenticity of play. Despite this cautionary note about practitioner non-verbal congruence, joining in with young children's imaginary play appears to offer a uniquely insightful opportunity to engage with children as a 'co-player' from the privileged position of being immersed within the context of verbal and non-verbal communication. Kitson (2015) recommends joining in with imaginary play as a play based teaching method, particularly in the area of supported social skills from within, whereas Hackett, Pahl, and Pool, (2017) researched from within 'den building' activities as a methodology in which researchers were immersed in the minutiae of the children's experience. However, imaginary play as an observation and assessment tool that deliberately lets go of adult control, detaches from learning objectives and assessment agendas, and engages with young children in their own preferred mode of expression, is not currently represented in policy, research methodology and literature.

This literature review has raised concerns for young children's well-being and self-efficacy in the face of the potentially negative experiences posed by increased formal numeracy and literacy teaching, reduced time for free play, low adult/child ratios and therefore potential increases in adult-led assessments. Bringing together the arguments detailed above, these issues present a serious dilemma for practitioners who are seeking to allow children to appreciate their own worth and develop their abilities to the fullest. An environment is created wherein the degree to which children are encouraged and allowed to be unique, is perhaps curtailed by a definition of 'useful' uniqueness that is dictated by economic policy. In answer to this, this study proposes joining in with imaginary role-play as an authentic method of 'knowing' young children, which is distinctly separate from children's perceived numeracy and literacy ability; to broaden conceptions of how practitioners and children can know one another in pursuit of the celebration and validation of the complexity and uniqueness of all young children.

Methodology

'What does 'joining in with children's imaginary play' do to the process of observation and assessment with two unique children?'

This study makes an original contribution to the field of research with young children. It explores 'joining in' with imaginary play as a method of 'knowing' the children that aims to deepen the observable insights, develop relationships and allow for the celebration of the complexity and individuality of young children at the start of their formal educational journey that is not governed by teaching objectives or pre-determined assessment agendas. In deliberately seeking to explore issues of uncertainty, contradiction and complexity in assessment, by implication, the intentions of the study also challenge the production of 'knowledge' gained through research. A post-structural approach has been adopted as this allows opportunities to glimpse the complexity of unique people and their continually evolving selves to 'understand the dynamics of relationships between knowledge/meaning, power and identity' (Hughes, 2010, p. 51).

Denzin and Lincoln argue that "qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (cited in Freeman, 2017, p. 3). Consequently, data transcripts were deductively analysed and thematically coded to identify themes that illuminated the effect of my presence in the imaginary play on the observation and assessment process. Denzin and Lincoln contend that 'objective reality can never be captured" (2011, p. 5). However, a commitment to validity was sought in the 'authenticity of participants voices' (Hughes, 2010, p. 53) through the autonomous nature of the children's imaginary play and close observation of non-verbal cues that my presence was genuinely appreciated and welcomed by the children.

Context and participants
The study was conducted in a small rural Yorkshire primary school with a predominantly white British background and with lower than average children in receipt of free school meals or with special educational needs Ofsted, 2014). The study adopted a case study approach and used convenience sampling methods to randomly recruit 2 children in reception class from 16 parent respondents. The sample is deliberately small and limited to one location for two reasons. Firstly, the small-scale, time limited nature of this study constrains the volume of in-depth analysis that is achievable. Secondly, as the insights generated were highly individual to the children, and by the very nature of post-structural thinking, not generalisable (Hughes, 2010). This negated the need for a larger sample.

Methods of data collection
Voice recordings were taken of play episodes. Multiple children often flowed in and out of the play making it difficult to identify the children's voices, and background chatter obscured some recordings. I began mentioning children's names as they arrived and/or tapping the recorder when the focus children were speaking. Additional field notes contain details that were not apparent from the voice recordings. The notes and recordings acted as reminders of my experiences with the children rather than as documentary evidence, as described by Hackett, Pahl and Pool (2017).

A participant observer aims to fit naturally into the situation in order to avoid creating an artificial scenario, thus allowing access to aspects of the situation that would otherwise be difficult to see by an outsider. However, an adult joining in with play had the potential to disrupt the children's ownership of their play, diminishing its enjoyability and consequent authenticity (McInnes et al, 2013). I sought to address this issue in three ways. Firstly, I was present in the setting two mornings a week over a 12-week period to allow the children to become familiar with my routine of joining in with their imaginary play in a way that was not customary at the setting. Secondly, I presented myself as a non-teaching adult whose sole function in the setting was to learn about play. Additionally, it was hoped that my brightly coloured, unconventional clothes would be a departure from typical practitioner-wear.

Participant observation as a method, can be criticised for influencing the participants behaviour, however, it could equally be argued that the researcher, as co-producer of the shared meaning being produced, is in an unrivalled position to understand the meaning (Denscombe, 2010). Rather than a detached, positivist approach (Hughes, 2010), rhizoanalysis is a process in which the researcher/observer cannot detach themselves (Cumming, 2013); the observer's perspective is an integral part of the unfolding collage of all the interrelated facets that move, seen or unseen, within the fabric of any given moment (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013). This view sees researchers as enmeshed with all that is happening (St. Pierre cited in Cumming, 2013). My relationship with the children, during the observations is arguably, therefore, inextricably linked to the collage.

Ethics
Ethical approval was granted for this study. Ethical considerations included informed consent from participants' parents and informed assent from the children (BERA, 2018). In accordance with BERA (2018) regulations, I joined in with all the children's play to avoid any child feeling unduly 'singled-out'

or excluded. The research design employed methods expressly chosen to facilitate enjoyable autonomous child-led play (Moyles, 2015) and to validate the worth and ownership of the participants' imaginary play (Kitson, 2015). The children were not expected to participate in anything they did not want to do (UN, 1989).

Findings

Joys and tensions of letting go of adult control over activities
In answer to the question 'What does 'joining in with children's imaginary play do to the process of observation and assessment with two unique reception children?', thematic analysis identified four prominent themes. Firstly, children were engaged in the imaginary play and appeared to accept me as a co-player; secondly, tensions arose between my role as a researcher, adult in the setting and co-player; thirdly, the immersive participatory nature of the observation method allowed meaningful understanding of both the play and non-verbal communication; and fourthly, shared humour and playful enjoyment seemed to facilitate warm relationships and 'knowing' of the children.

Joys of child-led imaginary play
The method clearly supports McInnes et al's (2013) findings that children are highly motivated and engaged by play in which they have creative autonomy. As a co-player I co-created the plots and characters rather than directing the play to my own script. The children's gleeful delight and absorption in the play appeared to indicate that my adult presence, as a co-player, did not detract from the children's ownership of the play or indicate that we were 'working' rather than 'playing'. This aspect of the method was a very positive experience for me and appeared to be so for the children. However, this manner of working also placed unexpected demands upon me. Play was often fast-paced and required quick thinking and spontaneity. The very nature of imaginary role-play, excludes any possible planning or preparation, and at times was quite tiring in its pull on creative energies and a challenge to stay focussed amongst the distractions of the other groups of children and activities in the setting over a whole morning. Low ratios of adults to children (stipulated by DfE, 2017) posed a significant constraint on my ability to stay focussed entirely on the children I was engaged with.

Tensions with letting go control

For the majority of the time, the play themes flowed and developed easily. However, on some occasions, the children appeared fractious with each other,

with disputes over roles and idea; children pulled in different directions with the play and lacked an overriding sense of direction. This contradicted my ideological stance that play is always highly engaging and enjoyable for children: in these instances, the children did not seem to be able to sustain the play or overcome conflicts and did not seem to be enjoying themselves. The pairings of children would seem to be relevant to this scenario however, perhaps confirming Rogers and Evans' (2008) assertions that often reception children are grouped for academic purposes and that children are motivated to overcome conflicts more harmoniously with play mates that are freely chosen (Dunn, 2004). I was inclined to discount these instances from the research findings, however upon reflection, I have found it more useful to confront my own perceptions of what constitutes 'valid' play. Perhaps play cannot be expected to always be optimally enjoyable as even enjoyable pursuits will experience periods of discomfort around conflicts and be susceptible to differing contexts and children's changing mood states. These occasional episodes do not taint the overall enjoyability of play or undermine its value. To expect play to exhibit perfectionism in its presentation is highly unrealistic and has caused me to confront my own ideological expectations.

A deliberate consequence of choosing a child-led method was that, happily, the children directed the themes of play. However, on occasion, the desire to allow children autonomy in their play came into conflict with my expectations of 'appropriate' play themes during some episodes of play. Rogers and Evans (2008) describe children's enjoyment of exploring dramatic life and death themes through their play. During various episodes, characters, for example, fell from sinking boats and were propelled from moving buses. I joined in with these episodes in character in trying to rescue people and administer first aid. The children were frequently delighted to announce that someone was in fact dead. This seemed in keeping with my expectations about children's imaginary role-play, however, these loud proclamations of death and disaster occasionally drew intrigued glances from other members of staff passing nearby in the setting. I felt caught between my knowledge that children typically explore themes of death and calamity during play on the one hand, and embarrassment at my complicity in what perhaps looked to outsiders like rather unnecessarily macabre play themes on the other. The practitioners in the setting were very welcoming of me and positive about my activities, however the strength of my need to conform and maintain adult acceptance was a palpable process running alongside my desire to facilitate the children's autonomous play. During one episode, I

became aware that a nearby group of children were playing at 'shooting babies'. I intervened in this instance but was left with a troubling sense of the uncertain and uncomfortable boundary between allowing children the autonomy to explore themes that are mutually enjoyable to them and at the same time acknowledging my own sensitives (and what I imagined those of the other practitioners to be) to norms of unacceptable themes of enjoyment.

Conflicts with adult/co-player role

Although the data highlights the insights of joining in with imaginary play, it also suggests unexpected tensions with the dual identity of adult, researcher and co-player. This supports Muhammad et al's (2015) suggestion that the multiple aspects of the researcher's identity can come into conflict with one another during the research process. Although, the children seemed to accept me as a co-player, my presence as an adult transpired to be my default identity when the children needed an adult. Typically, half of the class were involved with adult-led activities whilst the other half were able to play, consequently I was usually the only adult present in the shared area outside the classroom or outside (my presence as an extra adult was appreciated and therefore meant that children could spread out when I was present). Children from outside the play regularly interrupted to speak to me when, for example, they needed the toilet, had injured themselves and often to mediate disputes between other children in the setting. Goffman (1971) argues that people present certain characteristics of themselves that prompt other people to relate in particular ways. Perhaps the role of adulthood is therefore inescapable in its effects on how children relate to them. Sutton-Smith's (2001) assertion of the subordinate nature of childhood is suggestive of the power relations that constrain children, making gaining adult assistance and/or permission in the school setting unavoidable. Despite, my attempts to redefine myself as a non-practitioner adult, I was still unavoidably an adult nonetheless, with the responsibility and associated power.

There were multiple occasions when I felt it necessary to maintain adult boundaries of noise control during indoor play, prompted by the close proximity of other practitioners and nearby classrooms. There was an uncomfortable change of emphasis from being engaged with the developing play as a co-player to being a figure of elevated power over behaviour. Rogers and Evans (2006) describe the constraints put upon reception children's indoor imaginary play; this mirrored my experience as a co-player.

During 'Zombies', I came out of role when asking the children not to pull on my legs as they took me to prison. Tovey (2015) explains that rough and tumble play is often misinterpreted by adults as being aggressive and although I did not interpret it this way, what seemed appropriately boisterous play between children did not feel appropriate for me and created a conflict with where I set my boundaries as an adult. Kitson (2015) argues that adults need to make explicit boundaries about when imaginary play is over; although this seemed necessary at times, my power and influence to limit or halt the play was gratingly at odds with notions of integrating myself into authentic autonomous children's play. Since this initial research took place in early 2019, Atkinson, (2019) describes the complexity, benefits and limitations of attempting to dismantle adulthood for the purposes of research. Albeit with the focus of older children, her reflections about the incongruence and tensions of being 'one of the kids' whilst also actively being 'one of the adults' are at times irreconcilable positions, and this resonates with some of my findings. Despite my efforts to diminish the effects of adult/child hierarchy, it transpired that the children acted to re-enforce these boundaries (whether out of necessity or habit) and I, albeit reluctantly, also resorted to establishing my authority in sustaining the hierarchy I had sought to diminish. The arena of play, it would seem, could not be entirely divorced from the roles, rules and expectations of the reception class setting. It would be interesting to compare this method in a day nursery or pre-school setting in which adult/child ratios are higher, where there is less emphasis on formal teaching and greater freedom of friendship choice.

These examples highlight the joys and tensions inherent in letting go control of children's activities. On the one hand, autonomy brings play that is highly motivating and featuring fascinating levels of creativity and communication. However, the lack of adult control also means taking a less active role in providing direction when the continuity of play falters and picking an uncertain path through the unchartered territory of being within the context of children's social norms during play and the dramatic themes they explore. This, coupled with the dismantling and re-assembling of where my adult boundary lay in respect to rough and tumble play and the children's perceptions of me both as 'adult' gatekeeper and co-player, caused much food for thought and reflection.

Immersive participation and co-constructed meanings

As expected, as participant observer, I was keenly aware of non-verbal communication cues between myself and the children and their meanings in the context of our shared play.

(*Pseudonyms used)

(*From 'Zombies'*)
Bea walked alongside looking at me with a pretend evil glare and pointed to the shelter with an expression of gleeful fierceness.

The above example was aimed directly at me. I understood what was meant by the facial expressions, body language and gestures, supporting Mehrabian's (1972) argument about the significance of non-verbal communication for conveying meaning. Perhaps the active participation, like an actor waiting for a cue to speak in an improvised drama, prompts the participant to follow the action in a different way to a passive observer. Adam and Bea, demonstrated the subtlety and enthusiasm of their non-verbal communication skills throughout the play; it is unclear to what degree I would have noticed them had they not been directed at me and part of the shared communication of the play. Admittedly, a comparative approach to non-participant and participant observation might have made this aspect of the study clearer.

During play, there were instances when the meaning was implicit or implied within the words and appeared to rely upon a shared understanding, both of the play, but also of shared cultural understandings.

(*From 'Aeroplane'*)
A: (whispers to me conspiratorially with a cheeky smile) There's no sweeties in here…
S: there's no sweeties in here?
A: No.. they're down there…there's sweeties over there (he points to logs where the first plane is)

In this example, Adam playfully tries to persuade me to play in a different imaginary aeroplane to the rest of the children with the promise of imaginary sweets. We both understand that the sweets are imaginary, as is suggested by Rogers and Evans (2008) and, although this is not made explicit, we share the understanding that the cultural significance of sweets as treats might convince me, in my role, to move to the other aeroplane. Whispered conspiracies of this sort, between co-players, may be difficult to spot by non-participant observers, but nonetheless give spontaneous glimpses of the children's reasoning, sense of humour and understanding of cultural norms.

Building relationships
One of the aims of this study is to examine the impact of 'joining in with children's imaginary play' as a way of gathering assessment data. At this point, it is worth stating that the analysis detailed below is entirely judged from the researcher's position in how I felt about the method; the children's feelings on the method are interpreted by me but as this study did not seek to explicitly explore the children's response, this constitutes a gap in the findings. This study did not attempt to explicitly illicit the children's feelings about the methodology used. However, during the course of the research, I was struck by the warmth of the relationships that appeared to have developed between myself and the children. The EYFS (DfE, 2017) ascertains the need for warm, responsive relationships between practitioners and children although as is suggested earlier, the emphasis of child/practitioner relationships is swaying towards increasingly adult-led teaching (OFSTED, 2017) and is constrained in reception class by low adult/child ratios (DfE, 2017). The examples above were relational (in the context of our relationship): the playful cheekiness of Adam's suggestion impacted on me as developing my 'knowing' of Adam and therefore developing our relationship through shared enjoyment of playful humour. Carl Rogers writes 'the more I am open to the realities in me and in the other person, the less do I find myself rushing in to "fix things"' (2004, p. 21). Therefore, perhaps, the autonomy that imaginary play afforded the children created an ideal environment for the formation of child/researcher/adult relationships that are un-hierarchically unhindered by the pressures of adult learning objectives and agendas in which there are no right and wrong answers, as suggested by Sutton-Smith (2001).

The role of eye contact in these relationships was enlightening and seemed to be crucial. Many knowing glances passed between Adam, Bea and myself in which I convey my enjoyment and engagement of their company. Babies are described as relying on non-verbal cues, including facial expressions to gauge their caregiver's engagement (Gerhardt, 2004) which contributes to the security of the parent/child attachment (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991). Interestingly, Babad (2010) identifies lower levels of eye contact as being one of the ways teachers demonstrate differential behaviour (TDB) to lower achieving students, which is in turn keenly observed by those students. Perhaps, the role of positive eye contact in the context of children's autonomous play, engenders the formation of positive attachment relationships, in much the same way that caregivers demonstrate their engagement with babies; perhaps an interesting area for further study.

In the interest of demonstrating the validity of this research, it might seem appropriate to detail some of the things I 'learnt' about Bea and Adam as evidence of the assessment's success. However, the learning that took place defies easy description or quantification. This research method apparently

creates a distinction between the kinds of knowledge that can be verbalised and recorded for other people to easily interpret and the kind that is absorbed and internalised. The latter cannot be easily recorded or explained but forms the basis of the way one person relates and interacts with another with intuitive understanding. This kind of 'learning' about children may appear nebulous and invalid in its specificity to the two people, the adult and the child, and of little use to other practitioners or outside agencies. Potentially however, this does not negate its meaning, significance and usefulness. This approach perhaps inadvertently suggests that each new adult/child relationship will be uniquely different and as such, each pair will learn and interpret in their own new way, based on the strengths, abilities and individualities of the other.

Limitations

This study was a very small scale and situated within the specific context of one particular school. The role of researcher, although an adult in the setting, was deliberately constructed to be different to that of class teacher/early years practitioner in order to disrupt any stereotypes that the children might hold about an adult's presence being an indicator of 'work' rather than 'play'. Consequently, the findings of this study cannot be directly translated into a 'to do' list for practitioners. Furthermore, each setting has its own unique culture and rules and therefore the tensions of adult-role and co-player described above may be reduced or intensified depending on context. These tensions would be a matter for individual practitioners to negotiate and reflect on.

Implications for practice and research methodology

Despite the tensions between roles encountered during this study, there would appear to be real opportunities for imaginary play to be beneficial in assessing children's development. It can be used as an observation method to enable awareness of different aspects of children to those offered by either adult-led activities or non-participant observation, in which the children share their joy of imaginary role-play. Moreover, it allows us to see the joy and individuality of children as a separate kind of 'knowing' to that gained through assessment frameworks; the kind of 'knowing' that allows the discovery, validation and development of 'each child's personality, talents and abilities to the fullest' (UN, 1989). Finally, as a relationship building arena that is untethered from the pressure of the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of learning agendas and which can include shared humour, meaningful eye contact and non-verbal communication.

In conclusion, the essence of the children in this study cannot be summed up in words or discovered via assessments. I gained intuitive knowing of the children which helped me relate to their individual interests, ways of being and senses of humour; this 'knowing', gained through relationships and validated in the meaningful space created between people, could not be discovered or defined by a framework. The prioritisation of discreet portions of 'knowledge' ticked in boxes about children are perhaps not the things that enable children to bloom into the fullness of themselves. Arguably, the primacy of the assessment framework has the potential to blunderingly elevate the importance of the assessment process above the intuitive knowing that happens when time allows relationships that are open to the many possibilities and complexities of all unique children. The knowing that cannot be quantified, for which symbols in the form of words are anaemic and inadequate. The validating of all of that cannot possibly be assessed and therefore it is perhaps time for practitioners to join in with play and build meaningful relationships. In allowing all unique children the dignity of their complexity, comes forth their possibilities.

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