Playing social justice: How do early childhood teachers enact the right to play through resistance and subversion?

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Abstract

In this paper we narrate how playful pedagogies can resist the single story of formalised learning discourses in early childhood education and care. According to Wood (2015), play is fundamental to learning and established in international literature. In addition, through international treaties, children have the right to play (OHCHR, 1989). Yet, in contemporary outcomes-driven policy, formalised teaching has become normalised. Play is thus marginalised and positioned as a privilege, rather than as a right. Here, we position play in relation to democracy, equity, and social justice, by storying how two teachers facilitate the right to play, and we argue this is a fruitful sub-context for resistance. From this perspective, teachers' resistances do not just enable play, they embody and enact representative and democratic justice. First, the teachers in our study story representative forms of social justice in moral and ethical terms. They describe making play happen as an embodiment of 'being the right thing'. Second, teachers enact democratic forms of social justice through resistance actions. Such actions are positioned as moral acts described as 'doing the right thing' but carry risks as they attract scrutiny that entangles an emotional vulnerability.

Introduction

Play is eroding.

Young children's entitlement to play in their educational experience is undergoing erosion (Lewis, 2017). In fact, children have been deprived of self-initiated play for decades (Gray, 2020). It is argued that, after the impact of global Covid 19 lockdowns, play matters because it aids social and emotional recovery (Dodd et al, 2019). In play, children learn through exploration and thus develop knowledge about the world they inhabit (Souto-Manning, 2017). On a broader scale, new forms of relational ethics between children and the more-than-human world are required when we consider the unfolding environmental challenges (Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019). When play is seen through theories such as common worlds, children can be understood as living in a shared world rather than simply as part of societies (Blaise et al., 2020). Therefore, it is a matter of urgency that the entitlement to play in Article 31 of the United Nations

Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is not further neglected (Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights OHCHR, 1989; Brooker and Woodhead, 2013).

Whilst a long tradition of international research positions play as essential to early learning (Wood, 2015), there are tensions in translating play into classroom practice. Scholars such as Moyles (2015) found that playful pedagogies can defy the orderliness of curricula. Furthermore, accountability bodies frame teaching within standards agendas that can side-line child-initiated play (Wood, 2019). Thus, play occupies a contested curriculum space where there is tension between conceptions of early learning as 'multimodal, multi-sensory, and active, viewed holistically rather than in a linear or compartmentalised way' (Fairchild and Kay, 2021, p. 1).

The right to play and social justice.

The position we take in this paper is that the right to play is not just important to children's learning, but also fundamental to childhood itself (Brooker and Woodhead, 2013; Sahlberg and Doyle, 2019). Furthermore, because play is a right of children and essential for their growth, it becomes a matter of social justice that requires protection and defence (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017; OHCHR, 1989; Souto-Manning, 2017). Play does essential work to support children's growing capabilities as learners and their physical and mental development (Brooker and Woodhead, 2013). Additionally, play matters because it is a biological imperative that does wider essential work for human flourishing in supporting children to navigate friendships, solve problems, and learn how to take control (Sahlberg and Doyle, 2019). Thus, not only does play support learning and personal development, but children also directly experience matters of justice in their play through learning to assert themselves and about what is fair for themselves and others (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017; Souto-Manning, 2017).

Through play, children learn about their agency and capabilities to; 'rehearse and enact change, by asking questions, developing community, and

standing up for fairness – which will later be (re)named justice' (Souto-Manning, 2017, p. 787). Scholars such as Nicholson and Wisneski (2017) assert that play requires protection and defence because: 'Without play, we are taking away their most natural and therapeutic context to endure (and resist, subvert, and reassemble) the injustices we expose them to' (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017, p. 789). Therefore, a central premise of our study is the essential relationship between play and social justice, and an interest in how teachers seek ways to enable children's entitlement and right to play.

Whilst it remains the case that children have the right to play (OHCHR, 1989; Souto-Manning, 2017), this depends on an adult view of children as capable holders of rights (Cassidy et al., 2022). When play is positioned as a privilege, it runs the risk of generating more inequities as play opportunities are repressed in the drive for standardisation (Souto-Manning, 2017, pp. 785-787). When play is positioned as a right, it can be seen in relation to democracy, equity, and social justice, because children relate to the world around them through their play (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017).

Consequently, social justice and equity in early childhood education and care (ECEC) are directly related to play, yet enacting play remains full of tension (Archer and Albin-Clark, 2022; Shimpi and Nicholson, 2014). Multiple ideologies are associated with how social justice is enacted (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019). Subsequently, play is a characteristic of educational and social justice but remains challenging in a contested policy space (Nielson, 2019; Wong, 2013).

Aims of the paper

As accountability agendas cause educators to seek practices that resist dominant narratives (Moss, 2017), we enquire how the marginalisation of play circumvents 'rules of the game' (Duckworth, 2016, p.8). Our aim is to illuminate how teachers resist formalisation discourses to foreground the right to play. Through this, we problematise the inventive strategies that sidestep policy technologies, that Osgood (2021) argues 'contributes to the public good

through practices of worldly justice' (p. 171). Illuminating how resistances disrupt policy demands can exemplify pedagogical decision making in pushback movements (Archer and Albin-Clark, 2022).

Resistance has been researched in ECEC (Moss, 2017; 2019), but less is known about how resistance and subversions are enacted (Archer, 2021). Furthermore, Nicholson et al. (2020) posit that leadership of social justice is not explicit or critically examined in ECEC. Thus, we exemplify how resistances that foreground the right to play are experienced. From there we trouble how far that has the potential to be framed as a playfully serious enactment of both educational and social justice.

Firstly, we scope the literature on children's right to play, how play relates to democracy and equity, then how educational resistances are framed. Then we discuss our methodological framing through different theoretical perspectives. Finally, we offer two overlapping positions on the implications of resistances that promote the right to play as social justice in motion.

Review of the literature

The right to play

Children's right to play is recognised in the global treaty of UNCRC (OHCHR, 1989; Lewis, 2017). Significantly, the right to play is an innovative component because it acts as a gateway to other rights related to health and broader development (Davey and Lundy, 2011). Even though play is strongly associated with many domains of learning and development, governments do not take it seriously and the status of play has suffered (Brooker and Woodhead, 2013). Because play is in the control of children, it troubles how curriculum content is taught (Wood and Hedges, 2016). In contemporary outcomes-driven policy, adult-led formalised teaching models present a normalisation of 'schoolification', in attempts to make children 'school ready' at the expense of child-initiated play (Grieshaber and Ryan, 2018). Additionally, play is disappearing from children's home lives, as parents feel the pull of structured time and high achievements (Sahlberg and Doyle, 2019).

Consequently, play is effectively withheld from children (Murray et al., 2019).

Whilst children value their capacity to be autonomous in their play, Colliver and Doel-Mackaway (2021) state that this can be in tension with how adults both define and interpret play. Payà Rico and Bantulà Janot (2021) go further: 'Policies cannot be developed in favour of children where play is ignored' (p. 279). As the value and status of play is repressed within practice and research itself, it repeatedly needs to be reasserted (Archer and Albin-Clark, 2022; Rentzou et al., 2018). Subsequently, when play is taken seriously and considered essential to broader domains, then time and space for children's play comes to the fore in policy making (Voce, 2015).

Arguably, as ECEC moves towards increasing formalisation in the policy context of England, play is marginalised within accountability narratives (Cameron and Moss, 2020). Over time, as play has been diminished in education, a significant objective has not been realised as achievement gaps between different socio-economic groups remain largely unchanged (Sahlberg and Doyle, 2019). As play is pushed towards the periphery, it is repackaged as 'if time' (Galbraith, 2022), conditional on children first completing adult-led tasks. Tensions that marginalise play derive from the prescriptive nature of early education curricula (Anning, 2015). Further moves away from play are at risk of creating pedagogies of 'schoolification' where numeracy and literacy are foregrounded, and there is 'a narrow arid utterly predictable undertaking, devoid of creativity, excitement, wonder and joy' (Robert-Holmes and Moss, 2020, p.137).

Play and social justice

Play and social justice are related to each other because of the important functions play has for children's overall learning, growth, and personal development. Children learn about what it means to belong and be included through play (Wood, 2007). , directly connects the right to play and children's capabilities:

'By ensuring that children have the right to play, we ensure that they engage in learning that unleashes their infinite potential and capacity – to learn, to grow, to get along, and to strive for fairness and justice.'

Nicholson and Wisneski (2017) concur that play supports children's construction of meaning in the world, but go further; in asserting that play is also a form of intervention which can redress the negative consequences of poverty and other inequities. However, Wood (2007) argues that an uncritical commitment to the efficacy of play can…

'militate against equality of opportunity and equal access to curriculum provision because some children's choices, needs and interests are privileged over others' (p. 314).

This suggests that it is paramount to apply a critically reflexive teacher role to the inclusivity of play. An exemplification of the association between social justice and ECEC can be seen in the history of free kindergartens in the Australian city of Sydney, that were set up to support families in poverty (Wong, 2013). The kindergartens were designed as a socially just endeavour in: 'facilitating greater equity in the distribution of resources, challenging oppressive practices, supporting moral development, and enacting children's rights' (Wong, 2013, p. 313).

Cameron and Moss (2020) associate the values of ECEC with notions of equality, democracy, and diversity. Moreover, the discourses that are chosen to view play are an ethical act as they foreground various assumptions (Shimpi and Nicholson, 2014). Nicholson and Wisneski (2017) identify that a vital role of teacher educators is to position social justice as interconnected with: 'liberation, voice, equality, justice' (p. 789). Social justice in ECEC has multiple meanings, and Kessler and Swandener (2020) find Nancy Fraser's conception of social justice as three-dimensional domains of recognition, redistribution, and representation to be useful. Representative and democratic forms of justice are pertinent in enabling children to access their rights (Kessler and Swandener, 2020).

However, having the right to play recognised is not necessarily mobilised by ECEC access (Press et al., 2021). Little access to play is a social justice issue because it can hinder children's social, emotional, and cognitive growth, according to Kroll (2017). In a study of children from immigrant families in Arizona, social justice is bound with the safety to move and play (Maldonado, Swadener, and Khaleesi, 2020). The right to play with non-restrictive whole-body movement is crucial for minoritised children. This is because their movements are disciplined and perceived as a threat outside of education (Maldonado, Swadener and Khaleesi, 2020). When children are continually told 'we don't have time to play', essential embodied experiences of movement and touch become limited (Sapon-Shevin, 2020, p. 133). An ECEC social justice curriculum involves nurturing children who can physically play, move, connect, and touch in loving and caring cultures (Sapon-Shevin, 2020).

The right to play needs both protection and defence. As Nicholson and Wisneski (2017) argue, play is a form of therapy to 'resist, subvert, and reassemble' the future injustices that children will encounter (p. 789). Then again, children's real life play experiences are explicitly entangled with consideration for the world that children will inherit and share with more-than-humans (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Kummen, 2016). Osgood (2021) takes up posthuman and feminist materialist theories to look at how ECEC educators challenge social injustices. An important way of noticing social injustices, according to Osgood, is to attend to how practices are interconnected with adults, young children and materials, animals, things, and more-than-human elements of spaces. This requires an attentiveness to what is important to young children by: 'scaling down, researching and thinking with minor players outside of the main game' (Taylor 2020, p. 340). Taking the needs of young children seriously from the perspective of educational justice, Nielsen (2019) concluded that play becomes something 'we owe each other' (p. 465).

Although play and social justice are closely associated (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017; Wong,

2013; Wood, 2007) play is non-innocent. Play can reify deeply rooted inequities related to race, sex, and class (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017). Souto-Manning et al. (2019) maintain that education reproduces inequalities for minority groups. Play cultures require reflective and reflexive practices and attending to what might be unseen and undervalued (Nolan and Lamb, 2019, p. 218). Teachers being reflective about play practices require the redevelopment of both pedagogy and curriculum that attends to the history, voice, and experience of children in context (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2021, p. 197).

Play cultures that feature agency and autonomy are wedded to discourses that mobilise the right for children to have their voice heard. Article 12 of the UNCRC (OHCHR, 1989) articulates the requirement for children to express their thoughts and opinions. For our youngest children, eliciting and facilitating voice needs to account for context and the individual child (Wall et al., 2019). Indeed, educators' capacities to nurture slower listening cultures where voices can emerge are at risk within systems driven by measurement (Clark, 2020). Ball (2021) asserts that ECEC is suffused with neoliberal modalities of,

> 'visibility, accountability, transparency, measurement, calculation, comparison, evaluation, ratings, ranking, indicators, metrics, and indices' that influence interactions, decision making and are eventually imbued in the values that teachers instil in children' (p. xvi).

It is the case that listening to children's voices requires a sophistication that encompasses children's ideas, thoughts, and feelings (Robinson, 2021). Hence, the ethical imperative of enabling play that can nurture listening and voice are repositioned as a serious responsibility of and for educators (Souto-Manning, 2017).

In summary, the right to play does fundamental work (Brooker and Woodhead, 2013; Sahlberg and Doyle, 2019). Not only does it operate as a gateway for children in accessing other rights related to health and voice (Davey and Lundy, 2011; Robinson, 2021), it nurtures learning and the capacity to get along with others in community to navigate injustices (Nicholson

and Wisneski, 2017). Further, we concur that play supports children's construction of meaning in the world (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017); play enables voice (Wall et al., 2019), and play empowers children's agency to resist injustices (Sapon-Shevin, 2020). Because of this, our position is that play is a matter of social justice (Souto-Manning, 2017), and, for that reason, needs policymakers and teachers to protect its entitlement. In short, play cannot be ignored.

Early childhood education and resistance

There is, according to Moss (2019), an: 'early childhood resistance movement', composed of multiple individuals adopting a range of perspectives, theories, and narratives – one which: 'occupies many different spaces finding expression in many different forums' (p. 23). This resistance movement is characterised as including those who choose to adopt alternative paradigmatic positions to challenge the dominant neoliberal discourses which proliferate (Moss 2019). Such a movement, whilst not formally co-ordinated, is united in its challenge to the status quo, in its rejection of multiple assumptions about children and the work of early childhood education:

> '…it serves the valuable function of sustaining those who want to refuse the identity or subjectivity that the dominant discourse… seeks to impose on early childhood education and those who work in it' (Moss, 2019, p. 20).

ECEC resistance studies is a small but growing body of research. Often predicated on the contestability of neoliberal demands (Moss 2014), there is increasing interest in the possibilities for resistance and refusal by early educators (Archer, 2021; Albin-Clark and Archer, 2022; Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Much of this resistance scholarship takes an explicit social justice position, with reconceptualist writers having increasingly called for greater advocacy and social activism in terms of both policy and practice (e.g., Bloch et al., 2018). Mevawalla and Archer (2022) detail studies in which activist-practitioners and activist-scholars support agency and social change for children, families, communities, and fellow

practitioners (e.g., Cannella et al., 2016; Yelland and Frantz-Bentley, 2018).

The resistances detailed in the studies reviewed by Mevawalla and Archer take numerous forms. Both small and large-scale actions can produce sites for hopeful and flourishing pedagogies that can shift from marginalisation to more active politicised resistance (Albin-Clark and Archer, 2021). However, small actions and implicit activisms appear to proliferate in ECEC in which everyday places for resistance are spaces where marginalised agencies and voices can be amplified (Horton and Kraftl, 2009; Albin-Clark, 2018). Additionally, less visible pockets of resistance highlight actions taken 'under the radar' to respond to policy demands (Archer and Albin-Clark, 2022). Indeed, rather than 'waiting for the revolution', there is suggestion of moves by educators towards resistance and 'narrativisation' in local contexts (O'Loughlin, 2018, pp. 68-80). As such, educator resistances are not always large-scale, collective, or mobilised, but are often expressed through a dispersed network of actors. Individual actions include 'micro resistances' which are often local, 'quiet' and less visible (Archer, 2021).

Motivations for everyday resistance in ECEC are often grounded in ethical practice driven by commitment to deconstruct taken-for-granted assumptions and reconstruct practices (Fenech et al., 2010). Such resistance manifests when critically informed educators transform or reshape their world through their actions and disrupt singular notions of the educator's role and identity. Leafgren (2018) frames this as 'disobedient' professionals engaging in 'radical non-compliance' (p. 187). Whilst there is diversity within this resistance movement, there appears little literature which draws on empirical data in analysing and interrogating how this resistance manifests in an early childhood context. Such a gap in understanding highlighted a space to further explore this topic through the analysis of data gathered in the authors' studies.

Method

The We came together as researchers with two cases from separate studies (Albin-Clark, 2021;

2022c; Archer, 2020; 2021). What is common to both case studies is a shared interest in how ECEC educators make sense of their experiences and enact forms of resistance. Our research practices draw from two ontological positions. We weave forms of interpretative narrative inquiry and posthuman, feminist materialist and ethico-onto-epistemologies (Fox and Alldred, 2017) that also encompass the non-human and more-than-human world. In this paper, we employ narrative forms of inquiry as a lens to view and inform both the research processes and analysis. In the spirit of experimenting with methodological processes, we take inspiration from Koro-Ljungberg et al.'s calls for:

> '...porous, fluid, and brut methodological practices as a way to adhere to movements of the unrefined and leaky nature of childhood as well as methodology' (2020, p. 277).

The studies led by Albin-Clark (2018; 2021; 2022a) put to work posthuman, feminist materialist theories to illuminate the agencies of documentation practices (Strom et al., 2020). Such theories bring attention to the material-discursive relationalities between play, resistance, and social justice (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Through Barad's (2007) theory of agency as something co-produced intra-actively (rather than interactively) between the human and non-human, the documentation of children's play looks beyond the child and teacher. With this viewpoint, the narrative account of play includes a wider interpretation of what constitutes narrative voice and takes account of imagery and sensory data (Pink, 2015). As the theoretical positioning looks beyond the human, the enquiry considers other elements beyond language (Mazzei and Jackson, 2017, p. 1090).

The studies led by Archer (2020, 2021) draw on third space theory. Third space theory commonly rejects modernist binaries, including conventional agency/structure dualisms, and explores hybrid spaces between such binaries. A dictionary of critical theory defines third space as: 'A creative space between the discourse or position of the ruling subject and the discourse or position of the subaltern subject' (Buchanan, 2010, p. 468).

Previous research recognises the formation of professional identities in education as a site of struggle (Ball, 2003). However, Wang (2004) perceives third space in generative terms, one of 'infinite possibilities' (p. ix) and such transformational potential offers an affirmative perspective on this hybridity. Indeed, third space would appear to be often described in terms of its productive power. However, it is contended that third space is also potentially a space of conflict, of 'disruptive in-betweenness' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). In the study by Archer (2020; 2021), third space is interpreted theoretically and conceptually as a space in which professional identities are (re)formed; in a space where institutional discourses meet personal narratives. Therefore, narrative inquiry is central to the ways we have thought with our respective case studies. Additionally, both studies involved institutional ethical approval (University of Sheffield); ensuring compliance with data security and storage. Participant consent was gained and their anonymity, confidentiality, and right to withdraw were assured.

Narrative inquiry

'…[T]elling stories is the primary way we express what we know and who we are… letting the story become larger than an individual experience or an individual life' (Jeong-ee, 2016, p. 9).

The narrative turn(s) in the social sciences, and specifically education research, challenged traditional positivist paradigms that perceived the nature of knowledge as objective, based on universal laws and verifiable through reason and logic. Narrative inquiry as an expression of constructivism and interpretivism emphasises the importance of particularity of narratives (Bruner, 1990; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Narratives are rooted in specific contexts, socially constructed within a specific sociocultural and historical moment. Following Osgood's call for further space to 'hear the stories' (2012, p. 154) of early educators, this research seeks to contribute to this field of study into the experiences of those working in early childhood.

Many stories

Stories are multiple, and, although there is always more than one story, certain stories come to dominate. The power of dominant stories or dominant discourses (Foucault, 1991) means certain stories wield greater influence and become known as master narratives or power discourses. Presented as natural, unquestionable, and inevitable, these dominant discourses seek to impose what Unger (2005) terms the 'dictatorship of no alternatives'. Bruner cautions against the 'tyranny of a single story' (2002, p. 103). This sentiment is echoed by Adichie in her talk at TED.com (2009) 'The danger of a single story' in which she suggests:

'The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.'

In contemporary ECEC research, Moss (2017; 2019) points to the power of dominant discourses through 'privileged channels of communication' (p. 6) and 'in this way, through such reinforcement, a story gathers momentum and influence, becoming *the* story…' (pp. 6-7). Inspired by such writing, these narrative inquiries intend to respect the multiple narratives of numerous early educators, as a counterbalance to the singular (if seemingly shifting) policy narrative which arguably marginalises play. In addition, we experiment with bringing the non-human and more-than-human relationality as part of the multiplicity of storying.

Narratives and social justice

We approached the respective inquiries with an awareness of links between narratives and the potential for social justice. Whilst the studies were not primarily driven by advocacy, we would argue for the possibility that narratives of lives lived may also speak truth to power and may call into question the power of dominant discourses (and potentially oppressive meta-narratives) and their relationships to lived experiences.

The studies led by Albin-Clark (2021; 2022) involved empirical data creation with the documentation practices of teachers working in one

school, located in north-west England, in an area of high social disadvantage, and a largely mono-cultural population. The documentation of play is from one participant, Michelle (pseudonym), an experienced teacher of three and four-year-old children, with a senior management position – as Early Years curriculum lead. Instead of data collection, an experimental approach was adopted with data creation. This involved seeing the interview as an *intraview* (Kuntz and Presnall, 2012; Petersen, 2014), to take account of visual and sensory approaches (Pink, 2015). Along with the documentation, the more-than-human world of physical movements, the embodied human relationships and the materials, spaces, and location were considered along with narrative to 'mess with images and text to keep meaning on the move' (Taylor and Gannon, 2018, p. 468).

The study led by Archer (2021) involved empirical data collection through life story interviews (n=16) with early childhood educators from across England. These data were synthesised and analysed using a Critical Narrative Analysis framework (Rudman and Aldrich, 2017). This framework deploys an analytical process to interlink discourses and narratives based on considering how a participant positions themself within the narrative and how these ways of positioning relate to subjectivities constructed through policy (Laliberte-Rudman and Aldrich, 2017, p. 475). This paper draws on data from a story by Sophie (pseudonym).

What interested us in approaching this topic was not necessarily expressions of explicitly political perspectives (although these may, of course, have been present), but how individual narratives can reveal power dynamics which: 'often function as the unsaid ligaments that hold stories together' (Andrews, 2020, p. 277). This perspective of the interplay of power, agency and subjectivities guided the research which also entangled the more-than-human at play.

Data Stories

Got to find a way to be the right thing and do the right thing

The Our first data story (Albin-Clark, 2019) examined the documentation of children who were hanging and swinging in outdoor play. There are four elements in the data story that included a written description of the play with photographs (Figure 1). The documentation was then uploaded to Tapestry, which is a proprietary on-line system that creates observations and tracks curricula milestones. In addition, the data story included an intraview of the discussion of the documentation with capture of the sensory, non-verbal, and emotional more-than-human elements.

What the documentation illustrates are the benefits of play to later formalised skills associated with writing, and a policy context that requires tracking of learning progress. As part of the documentation, Michelle's commentary brought attention to gross motor skills and how they acted as precursors to later fine motor skills involved in pencil grip for writing. Along with defence of play, Michelle was cognisant of how play supported multiple domains of learning, from the social (Kroll, 2017), to the right to play through large unrestricted physical movements (Maldonado, Swadener, and Khaleesi, 2020). Here, play is recognised as innovative in its capacity to act as a gateway for other rights that combine health and the right to education (Davey and Lundy, 2011). Particularly frustrated non-verbal responses, such as raised voice, non-verbal gestures, and changes in tone, swirled around the emotional toll of warding off regulatory scrutiny (e.g., 'annoying', 'drive me nuts', 'disgruntled'). With the protection and defence of play came the emotions involved in ensuring the right to play was not withheld (Archer and Albin-Clark, 2022; Murray, Swadener and Smith, 2019; Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017).
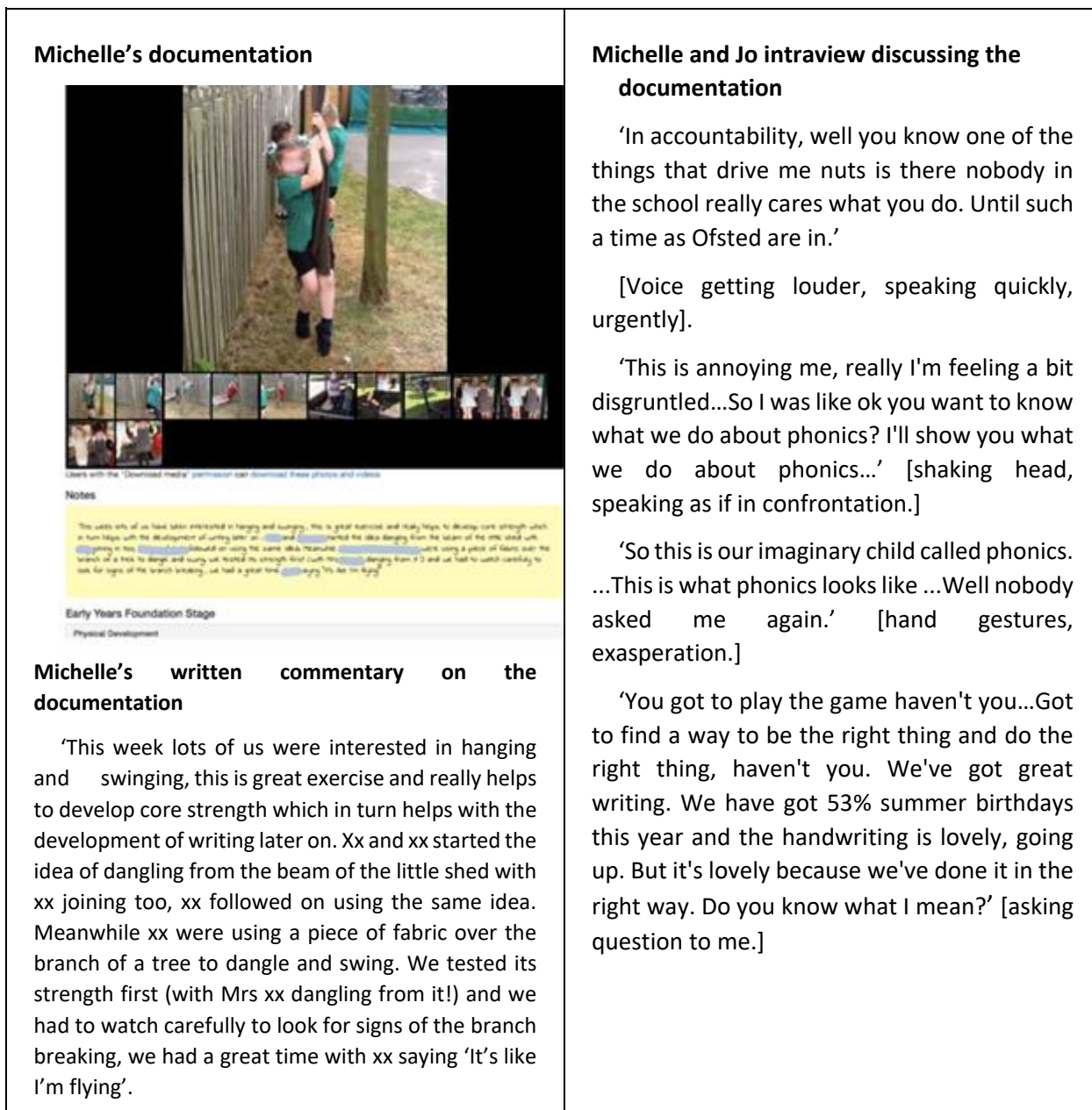
Michelle's documentation

Michelle's written commentary on the documentation

'This week lots of us were interested in hanging and swinging, this is great exercise and really helps to develop core strength which in turn helps with the development of writing later on. Xx and xx started the idea of dangling from the beam of the little shed with xx joining too, xx followed on using the same idea. Meanwhile xx were using a piece of fabric over the branch of a tree to dangle and swing. We tested its strength first (with Mrs xx dangling from it!) and we had to watch carefully to look for signs of the branch breaking, we had a great time with xx saying 'It's like I'm flying'.

Michelle and Jo intraview discussing the documentation

'In accountability, well you know one of the things that drive me nuts is there nobody in the school really cares what you do. Until such a time as Ofsted are in.'

[Voice getting louder, speaking quickly, urgently].

'This is annoying me, really I'm feeling a bit disgruntled…So I was like ok you want to know what we do about phonics? I'll show you what we do about phonics…' [shaking head, speaking as if in confrontation.]

'So this is our imaginary child called phonics. ...This is what phonics looks like ...Well nobody asked me again.' [hand gestures, exasperation.]

'You got to play the game haven't you…Got to find a way to be the right thing and do the right thing, haven't you. We've got great writing. We have got 53% summer birthdays this year and the handwriting is lovely, going up. But it's lovely because we've done it in the right way. Do you know what I mean?' [asking question to me.]

Figure 1. Michelle's Documentation

Whilst Michelle positions play as a serious endeavour, she anticipated how non-compliance (Leafgren, 2018) to normalised practices might attract scrutiny. The need to justify informal learning echoes how the status of play has suffered (Brooker and Woodhead, 2013). To prepare herself for scrutiny, Michelle created documentation of 'imaginary children' – rather than named children – so they can be reused, in subsequent years, when questioned by school subject co-ordinators in an imagined future:

'In accountability, well, you know one of the things that drive me nuts is there's nobody in the school really cares what you do. Until such a time as Ofsted are in' (Michelle).

Through visualising child-initiated, whole body, physical play, instead of more informal approaches, Michelle rejected pedagogies of 'schoolification' (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). With unconventional materials, and the risky nature of outdoor play, Michelle celebrated children's play ideas that could have been marginalised. Such actions model practice and play values that; 'resist, subvert,

and reassemble', which could enable children to mitigate future injustices (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017, p. 789).

Because outdoor play is associated with child-initiated play (Maynard et al., 2013), Michelle's documentation takes children's viewpoints through their non-verbal and physical cues. Such forms of listening represent a sophisticated conceptualisation of child voice that can support children's right to have their views taken seriously (Robinson, 2021). The right to play as an act of social justice shimmered through one particular set of statements:

'You got to play the game haven't you…Got to find a way to be the right thing and do the right thing, haven't you. We've got great writing, we have got 53% summer birthdays this year and the handwriting is lovely, going up. But it's lovely because we've done it in the right way, do you know what I mean?' (Michelle).

Here, Michelle is prescient of the tensions inherent in a contested policy space by articulating assessment as a game to be played (Albin-Clark, 2021; Fairchild and Kay, 2020; Basford and Bath, 2014). Within the phrase 'But it's lovely because we've done it in the right way, do you know what I mean?' (Michelle), 'right' can be read in multiple ways. 'Right' is connected to the right to play; a form of compliance; or as a moral signifier of actions that align with values associated with the non-negotiation of play. This echoed Souto-Manning's (2017) declaration that, if play is withheld from children, it is tantamount to denying their right to childhood itself.

'I knew I was doing the right thing'

The second data story (Archer, 2020) is derived from an interview with Sophie. Newly Qualified Teacher Sophie had recently joined a school (in the South of England) to lead the Reception class.

Sophie described finding her pedagogical decisions criticised by some school colleagues. Her plans for prioritising loose parts play outdoors were met with disapproval, but, nonetheless, these views remained important to her. However, whilst Sophie's actions in arguing for these resources demonstrate her agency, tenacity and bravery in her convictions, she also

identified the repercussions of this, in terms of feeling isolated:

'It was an emotional time as well because I knew I was doing the right thing, but it can be very lonely in a one form entry school. The tyres and drainpipes are back though!' (Sophie).

Sophie's narrative, in which she contested the school culture on what was deemed appropriate resources, is a further example of ethical practice as a resistance. Sophie's beliefs in the loose parts provision outdoors, and her insistence on the pedagogical affordances of these resources, were met with disapproval by colleagues. Despite these micro level pressures, Sophie retained a sense of what she believed was ethical practice:

Interviewer: So, advocating for play sounds as if it has been a big part of your story here. So where did the motivation for that come from?

Sophie (Reception Teacher) describes the challenge of introducing 'loose parts' outdoor play.

'…When I arrived I was brought in to change my classroom, to bring play into the class, it wasn't revolutionary as EYFS has been around for a long time. I didn't think my ideas were different from what many other practitioners are doing, but in my school it was not understood.

'So I had to teach my TAs [teaching assistants] who were on board. The teacher that had been working in Reception felt extremely uncomfortable and I took lots of advice from the Early years team at the local authority and they said 'just keep focussing on what good early years practice is.

'But then I received this feedback from the teacher: 'If that is good early years practice, what was I doing?!' I brought in tyres and drainpipes and was told to take them away by the office staff, and it was a real challenge. But actually, there were times when I was taken into the head's office and was told 'you are doing a great job, don't worry about this person, that person'. TAs who weren't even in my class had an opinion on what I was doing and that the children wouldn't learn as well…'.
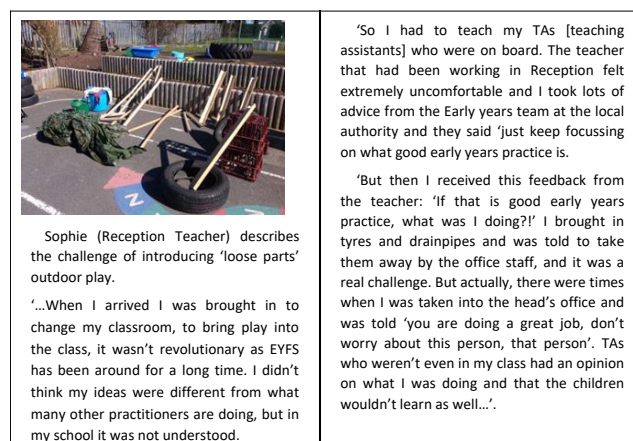
Figure 2. Sophie's Documentation

Through Sophie: I knew I was right! All of my training, experience, and belief system is about play. Children not sitting at tables with identical books...Everything I changed, the office staff had something to say about it, the TAs had something to say about it. And that was wearing, it for these opportunities as a right for all was hard, but I had to stick to my guns because that was what I had been brought in to do.

Interviewer: So what sustained you through that period?

Sophie: I'm quite stubborn! I think just in my beliefs. I really believe in play and outdoor learning. I know I'm not perfect, but I am always learning…

Sophie draws on her 'belief system' and maintains a commitment to her planned outdoor provision. She resists the critique from colleagues and expresses responsibility children. Sophie challenged demands on her practice with an ethical response. This narrative demonstrates the power of 'no', as a 'resistance-based professionalism' (Fenech et al., 2010, p. 89). As Fenech et al. (2010) comment:

'resistance is grounded in ethical practice that is driven by an intentional commitment to continually deconstruct taken-for-granted truths and reconstruct practices' (p. 92).

Such resistance to school culture and managerial demands is based in ethical practice operating beyond external demands and reflects analysis by Leafgren (2018) whose 'disobedient' professionals engage in 'radical noncompliance'. Leafgren calls for 'reimagining school spaces as spaces of joy, generosity, and justice; of creative maladjustments in the face of mundane mandates' (p. 187). Such a finding also resonates with an earlier study of early childhood educators in New Zealand (Warren, 2014) which concludes: 'critical professionalism and a critical ecology depend on teachers' self-efficacy to assert social justice values and beliefs....' (p. 134).

Discussion

Within The right to play and social justice are implicitly and explicitly woven through both narratives, as discussed above. Explicitly, children's right to whole body movements in a physical and emotionally safe environment became visible, and Maldonado et al., (2020) assert this is bound with social justice. However, what is also at work are hidden and implicit actions that involve recognising, embodying, observing, facilitating, protecting, and documenting play with 'being' and 'doing' the 'right thing' (Archer and Albin-Clark, 2022). The word and meaning of 'right' loomed large in both narratives. As such, the right to play is something a teacher *embodies* and *actions*. Hence, social justice is exemplified through ECEC pedagogical leadership

that Nicholson et al. (2020) claim is lacking in research.

In the discussion we take two overlapping positions that exemplify representative and democratic justice entangled with children's access to rights (Kessler and Swandener, 2020). Firstly, we propose that teachers create representative forms of social justice in promoting the right to play by *making play happen* and articulate this as essential to their professional embodiment as 'being the right thing'. Secondly, teachers manifest democratic forms of social justice through resistance actions of 'doing the right thing' where movements of social justice become visible through an emotional vulnerability to scrutiny.

Position 1: Being the right thing by making play happen as a representative form of justice.

Our first position is that teachers who foreground the right to play mobilise representative forms of justice (Kessler and Swandener, 2020). Because children make decisions in play, their ideas, thoughts, and points of view are represented. Facilitating the right to play seems to be integral to professional identities and has moral, and ethical, dimensions for both narratives. It is especially interesting that the phrase 'being the right thing' appeared in both narratives. Such language echoes Sapon-Shevin (2020) findings that an ECEC social justice curriculum involves playful physical movements. We argue that making play happens in lively relationships between children, space, time, and things. It involves attending to what interests and motivates children, exemplified in Michelle taking her children's risky physical play respectfully and Sophie's determination to bring play into practice as a newly qualified teacher.

At times, making play happen can be hidden and resistances framed as implicit activisms (Horton and Kraftl, 2009) and small-scale (Albin-Clark and Archer 2021; Archer, 2021). Yet, play went beyond the modest. Therefore, we build on the work of Horton and Kraftl (2009) to offer exemplification of movements from implicit activism to what is a more *explicit* activism. In positioning resistance to formalisation, our discussion tells alternatives to the single story (Adichie, 2009). When play becomes large

in scale and outdoors, it becomes more visible. We argue this is an explicit activism that characterises the right to play as an act of social justice (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017).

In addition, the right to play as an act of social justice involves low-cost, open-ended, and sustainable materials. This is seen in Michelle's and Sophie's schools: through access to outdoor spaces, with materials such as drainpipes, bread crates, and lengths of fabric. As well as being sustainable, the outdoor environment can encourage whole body play that embraces spontaneous, child-led experiences. As such, making the right to play happen can be seen as unconventional in approach, location, and materials. This can be contrary to school cultures where formalised practices are assigned greater value. Access to large scale movements is prescient as children may have experienced limited access to outdoors during Covid-19 lockdowns. Furthermore, the freedom to move can be related to social justice when some children's movements are policed outside schooling (Souto-Manning, 2017).

Thus, making play happen involves space, time, and a whole host of materials (Albin-Clark, 2022b). Drawing from posthuman and feminist materialist theories the non-human actants come into view (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). The human world of children and teachers acted in relation to the non-human world of the tree branch, the stretched fabric, drainpipes, tyres, unencumbered space, time made for child-initiated play, the camera, and the material of the documentation. With posthuman and feminist materialist theoretical lens, space and materials can be understood as performative agents (Albin-Clark, 2021). The relationality in-between the human and non-human world are all at work and at play in 'being the right thing'.

Position 2: Doing the right thing in making play happen as a democratic form of social justice.

Our second position illustrates democratic forms of social justice in making play happen through enacting resistance movements of 'doing the right thing'. Democratic behaviours are associated with democratic forms of social justice (Kessler and

Swandener, 2020), and both teachers' non-compliance to more formalised learning exemplifies such behaviours. They resist and are a 'disobedient' professional (Leafgren, 2018) in order to enable children's access to their right to play.

When play becomes visible, it invites scrutiny and questioning from colleagues that troubles the value and status of play (Brooker and Woodhead, 2013). When play is queried, it suggests play is a privilege rather than a right of children (Souto-Manning, 2017). This might be related to the fact that outdoor play does not always resemble normalised teaching. Grieshaber and Ryan (2018) posit that 'schoolification' marginalises child-initiated play. Play on a large scale cannot be hidden behind classroom doors. In play, learning is related to richer domains of learning, directed by children, and can involve large-scale whole-body movements that are inherently unpredictable, messy, and spontaneous. Such models of learning where control is in children's hands trouble the predictability of how the content of curricula is related to teaching (Wood and Hedges, 2016).

Scrutiny of the right to play brought vulnerability to Sophie and Michelle. Doing the 'right thing' involves ethical motivations for deconstructing taken for granted practices (Fenech et al., 2010) through resistances and those efforts enfold an emotional toll. Emotions can have a role to play in mobilising activisms (Albin-Clark, 2018; 2020; Archer, 2021). Both teachers navigate an unwelcome terrain of emotional labour that suggests some of the tensions involved in acts of social justice.

Both teachers are resisting more conventional discourses associated with learning in the way they put the material world to work. If we soften the gaze to the relationality in-between the human and non-human, it becomes possible to sense the material-discursive at work. Theorists such as Barad (2007) consider that discursive practices, materiality, and matter of the world are in relation, rather than separate from each other (cited in Levy et al., 2016). So, in both narratives, the materiality bound up with making play happen can be associated with discourses that value play (Chesworth, 2019). In this

way, the materials or 'stuff' of play becomes part of making play happen (Archer, 2022b).

Moreover, the outdoor play experiences that both teachers created support social justice through resistance practices by challenging and being non-compliant. When learning is framed as playful, active, outdoor, and child-directed, it challenges formalised learning (Cameron and Moss, 2020). Wong (2013) argues that ECEC is well placed to support social justice by challenging practices and enabling children to access their rights. Secondly, allowing children to access their right to play by forms of non-compliance characterises what Leafgren (2018) terms the 'disobedient' professional.

As such, Michelle and Sophie both resist and subvert pressures, scrutiny, and colleague expectations to make play happen, and demonstrate how play is implicated with concerns of justice (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017). In doing so, it is possible to see how social justice is alive and well, in how teachers resist and subvert. In essence, we extend and exemplify Kessler and Swandener (2020) associations with ECEC and social justice by asserting that teachers enact and embody the right to play as representative and democratic social justice movements.

Implications

In our study we draw on the two data stories to position the right to play as representative and democratic forms of educational justice (Kessler and Swandener, 2020; Nielsen, 2019). Furthermore, the ways in which both teachers took seriously the need to protect children's access to play and the equitable provision of resources, suggests how fundamental play is positioned in their practice (Brooker and Woodhead, 2013; Sahlberg and Doyle, 2019). In addition, the defence of children's play illuminates how imperative play is deemed by ECEC teachers, in ways that Nicholson and Wisneski (2017) assert can act as a fundamental way to endure injustices. In exploring teacher subversions to formalised learning, we offer articulations of how ECEC resistances are enacted that directly mobilise the right to play as an act of social justice (Archer, 2021; Moss, 2017, 2019).

We argue that, because both teachers were critically reflexive in their play practices, they enabled children's right to play.

In summary, we need to further problematise the implications and risks of mobilising play (Shimpi and Nicholson, 2014). Making play happen needs a critical awareness of the relationship between rights and play agendas and the tensions involved navigating the value of play in the complexity of ECEC (Wong, 2013). Saying 'no' to play's marginalisation brings teachers into a professionalism founded on resistance (Fenech et al 2010). Professionality and ethics conflate when the duty to encourage play is upheld (Souto-Manning, 2017). Both teachers pushed back to exert control by positioning children as capable holders of rights (Cassidy et al., 2022). But scrutiny brings emotional costs (Albin-Clark, 2018) when implicit activism (Horton and Kraftl, 2009) becomes explicit. The visibility of resistance movements in our teacher narratives moved beyond the small-scale (Albin-Clark, 2020; Albin-Clark and Archer, 2021; Archer, 2021; Archer and Archer, 2022). Enacting and embodying the right to play in more visible ways becomes more problematic in practice, illustrating the multiple ideologies of social justice (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019).

Making play happen involves outdoor, large-scale physical activity in our narratives. Managing such play can be time-consuming, resource heavy and needs inventive timetables, access, space, and staffing – all daunting prospects in a pervading culture that does not take play seriously (Brooker and Woodhead, 2013). The scale and visibility of play attracts attention in heavily contested policy spaces (Fairchild and Kay, 2021). Thus, it requires articulation of how play benefits learning through curriculum frames, which is complex when the concept is suffused with ambiguities. Additionally, play lacks coherence in curriculum policy and is vulnerable to accountability narratives (Colliver and Doel-Mackaway, 2021).

Making play happen not only facilitates children's right to play, but also recognises the vitality and invitation of the more-than-human world of time, space, and materials (Albin-Clark, 2022b). Time and space for play can nurture slower pedagogies (Clark,

2018). Observing and supporting child-led play can enculture sophisticated understandings of how a child's voice is expressed. Listening in these broader frames contributes towards Article 12 of the UNCRC that acknowledges the entitlement of children to have their views taken seriously (Robinson, 2021). Playful explorations can catalyse children's theorising and knowledge of the world that they inhabit and will inherit (Souto-Manning, 2017). It matters that children are viewed as living in a shared world (Blaise et al. 2020). Through play, children learn how to be resistant and this matters in future worlds rife with inequity (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017).

Our conclusion is that play is not a privilege, but a right enshrined in the UNCRC as expressed by scholars such as Souto-Manning (2017). Lack of access to play is a social justice issue as it impedes social, emotional, and cognitive skills (Kroll, 2017). Play remains an urgent concern, it cannot afford to be further neglected and marginalised as 'if time' (Brooker and Woodhead, 2013; Galbraith, 2022). Play is less present in children's homes as parents feel the draw of organised time (Sahlberg and Doyle, 2019). To withhold play denies children their childhood, and play is needed more than ever with recent pandemic lockdowns (Dodd et al, 2021; Souto-Manning, 2017).

Now is the time to acknowledge and amplify resistances that promote the right to play. But there are risks involved with non-compliance being a 'disobedient' professional (Leafgren, 2018) that trouble how curriculum content is taught (Wood and Hedges, 2016). We need more than one story of learning; single stories are only ever partial (Adichie, 2009). ECEC resistance movements need occupation and expression (Moss, 2019). Stories require telling from the 'minor players outside of the main game' (Taylor 2020, p.340). Voices of teachers, children, and families must be added into resistance spaces to counteract a 'dictatorship of no alternatives' (Unger, 2005, p. 1). Telling hopeful stories of play offers counter-narratives to the normalisation of 'schoolification' (Grieshaber and Ryan, 2018). We encourage educators to network with other 'disobedient' professionals (Leafgren, 2018). Adopting alternative resistance positions can shift the

perspective of play as more than a privilege and in doing so create transformational spaces where game rules are no longer accepted (Duckworth, 2016). The more-than-human world of materials, space and time are agentive in play and therefore our resistance movements need to be mindful of their contribution (Albin-Clark, 2022b). From this position, teachers' resistances and subversions do not just enable playful pedagogies, they embody and enact representative and democratic justice (Kessler and Swandener, 2020; Nielsen, 2019). Moreover, children's access to and inclusion in play is positioned as a moral imperative by both teachers, which suggests how seriously the right to play is positioned (Nicholson and Wisneski, 2017; Wood, 2007). Social justice *needs* serious play.

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