

Original Research Paper

‘You’re Allowed to Play’: Children’s Rights at Playcentre

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Abstract

Recent research in New Zealand investigated perceptions of children’s rights in three different early childhood settings. This article reports on research investigating perceptions of children’s rights in a playcentre (Te One, 2009). With its strong, coherent philosophical commitment to free, spontaneous play, the playcentre data revealed that both children and parents believed that children had a right to choose where they wanted to play, and that they should be able to play freely, uninterrupted by others. Influenced by the ‘playcentre way’, some parents changed their attitudes about children and children’s rights, recognising children’s actions as agentic. Consequently, this group of parents transformed the way they parented. However, as in any community, minor conflicts of interest emerged and this paper suggests that a children’s rights-based approach has the potential to resolve these tensions.

Introduction

In the decade before the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) was finalised, Gwen Somerset (1976, p.25), a recognised leader of the Playcentre movement argued for:

... the acceptance of children as people [and] giving children the same consideration, courtesy and approval as is extended to adults. When this attitude is present, a child feels that the adult approves of play, and values his efforts.

Somerset was a pioneering advocate for children’s rights to play, and promoted adults’ active involvement in that play. The benefits of play are an integral part of the playcentre philosophy which centres on the child’s right to free, spontaneous, uninterrupted play (Densem & Chapman, 2000; May, 2001; Somerset, 1976). Somerset (1976, p.15) commented that the role of adults in the playcentre movement was to construct the play environment to create optimal conditions for learning the ‘playcentre way’:

Young children in our society are no longer dependent only on what their immediate environment has to offer. It is in our own hands to arrange a child’s world so as to provide equipment, space, time and models in order that each may develop skills, imagination and logical thinking.

UNCROC itself does not enshrine the right to play, but Article 31 (Child Rights Information Network [CRIN], 2007, p.14) entitles children to time for recreation and leisure (play).

Similarly, Article 29 (CRIN, 2007, p.13) aspires to enhancing opportunities for children to develop to their fullest potential. Further exploration of how UNCROC is implemented has identified that children's participation in meaningful activities is an essential ingredient promoting development (Lansdown, 2005; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005). Meaningful participation, according to Article 12 of UNCROC, requires adults to consult and inform children about all actions that concern them (the children). UNCROC obliges parents, institutions, employers, and whoever else cares for children to take account of children's entitlements.

Sample and Method

This paper presents data gathered during fieldwork in one playcentre (the Playcentre), that was part of a larger study investigating perceptions of young children's rights in early childhood settings (Te One, 2009). Two questions guided the research:

1. How do children, teachers, and adults who held a position of responsibility in family/parent-led centres, perceive children's rights in early childhood settings?
2. How children's rights were enacted in early childhood settings?

Interpretive, qualitative approaches were used to investigate perceptions of children's rights in the three case study early childhood settings. Data were generated through focus group interviews with adults, individual interviews with adults, conversational interviews with children and observational field notes and photographs. A researcher journal documented insights and reflective comments. Multiple methods (Denzin, 2001) created possibilities for data to be triangulated, and controlled for bias.

A participatory research approach guided this research (Te One, 2007), bounded by explicit ethical guidelines for Victoria University of Wellington's Human Ethics Committee and the New Zealand Association for Research in Education's ethical guidelines (New Zealand Association for Research in Education, March, 1999). Adult participants were invited by letter, and through meetings. The researcher sought informed, voluntary consent from teachers and parents in the parent run service. A separate information booklet and assent form was prepared for child participants (Te One, 2007, 2009). All names used for children and adults in this paper are pseudonyms.

NVIVO, a qualitative computer software tool, was used in the data analysis. Data were analysed for comparative points of similarity and difference once it had been categorised into broad conceptual themes.

An intention was to learn as much as possible about perceptions of children's rights from three different case studies, and so a level of comparison was inevitable. However, a deliberate decision was made to present each case separately so as to avoid comparisons, and none of the case studies are representative other services of the same type.

The study reveals children's perceptions of what they believed they were entitled to at Playcentre; their parents' perceptions of their role to support children's play; how parents' attitudes changed as a result of being involved in Playcentre; and, some tensions that arose within the particular Playcentre community.

Children's Ideas about their Rights to Play

Children's perceptions about their rights to play supported Somerset's (1976; 1986) observation that play is children's work. The following conversational interview (see Te One, 2007) took place inside in the dress-up area with a group of four-year-old children:

- Liam: You're allowed to play – you can play with the toys, to eat lunch, to paint, to play, to mow the lawn, to play the games. You can play inside or go out of the house to play.
- Ashley: You can play with the play dough; play with the dollies and the ponies.
- Researcher: Does anyone tell you what to play?
- Sally: Not really. (Field notes, Day 13, Playcentre)

Liam's answer, "You're allowed to play", expressed a general entitlement to play which is then explained further by describing what he thought his claim meant, listing an interesting array of activities, including eating. The most revealing comment was Sally's response to the researcher's question at the end of this short conversation, indicating that these children felt able to choose where to play and what to play. Theoretically, this places children in a powerful position as self-determining agents of their experiences and actions (Prout & James, 1990; Pufall & Unsworth, 2004; Smith, 2007). Two points emerge in the following example. First, children's perceptions of their rights to be free to play, and second, how this freedom is interpreted by Millie in terms of choices about what to play. So, the right to play – expressed as an allowance by Liam – is refined to choices about what to play in Millie's responses:

- Millie: Well, you're allowed to do anything you want. You're allowed to play with the blocks; you're allowed to play with the puzzles; you're allowed to draw, and paint and you can swing, and play with anything.
- Researcher: How do you know?
- Millie: Because they don't say that [you can't], and the other children play with everything.
- Researcher: Who is 'they'?
- Millie: The grown-ups. And the children just play with everything and that's all I want to say. (Field notes, Day 13, Playcentre)

Millie actualised her perceptions of her rights through her experience of parents' non-interference, and, in a positive sense, by observing other children as they engaged with the activities. Sylvia confirmed the free play ethos:

- Sylvia: You're allowed to do anything at Playcentre.
- Researcher: Anything? How do you know?
- Sylvia: My mum told me. She told me I could do everything at Playcentre.
- Researcher: Are there any rules at Playcentre?

Sylvia: No, no I don't think so. Would you like to talk to Krystal now? What are children allowed to do here Krystal, at Playcentre?

Krystal is busy drawing.

Krystal: You can draw.

Sylvia: Well, at Playcentre [children] can do anything, anything they like. (Field notes, Day 13, Playcentre)

Sylvia's comments express a perception that children are free to choose to do anything at Playcentre. Her opinion, confirmed by her mother, reflects an underlying assumption that the children will be supported in whatever choices they make when they are at this particular Playcentre. Millie, Liam, Ashley, and Sally all hint at an environment rich in choice, where the role of the adult is passive but facilitative (Fleer & Richardson, 2004; Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996) and this is explored in the next section.

Parents' Perceptions about Play, Choices, and Rights

Based on children's responses, one could assume that the freedom of choice and freedom to play might constitute children's rights in this setting. The parents perceived the right to play as part of the playcentre ethos. Various implications of providing for that entitlement were evident in the adult participants' explanations of what free play as a right for children meant. Several parents believed that the New Zealand Playcentre Federation expected 16 areas of play to be set up for every session. Angela (parent), who had recently completed Part Two of her playcentre training, had this to say:

I believe the 16 areas of play is like their right. And sometimes ... I think that we endeavour ... I don't say we achieve it all the time ... to give them learning or extend their learning in the direction that they're trying to go to. (Angela, Parent interview, Playcentre)

Provision to enable children to exercise their right to play across 16 areas was seen as an adult responsibility. The above quote indicates that this involved more than merely preparing the environment; adults had a responsibility to a) identify what children were learning and, b) extend learning. Somerset (1976, p.27) believed that adults in the playcentre should be "models with whom we identify and who contribute to our personal growth ... who gets into play in spirit ... and is thus able to employ the living world to help stimulate a child's search for meaning". Angela's reference to "we" suggests that parents in this cooperative parent-led service shared responsibility to make sense of children's learning, and also indicates a common understanding of parental expectations. Karen (a parent) described it as a responsibility:

We have a responsibility to ensure that they've got those emotional things, and physical things and [we need to make sure that] creative things [like paint and collage] are available for them to reach. They can reach them, they're low enough, and they are accessible to them. So we have to do that ... to ensure they can reach them and they know where they are. (Karen, Focus Group Interview, Playcentre)

Adult responsibility for providing learning opportunities was the Playcentre's way of supporting children's agency and participation rights. As Bernie (parent) said:

Because [children] are put first, that's the most wonderful thing in the world. It's all, you know the maxim: child-initiated play? By doing, they will learn. By doing that very thing, by putting the children first and saying that we're the support for them. We're not here to tell them what to do. We're not here to intervene in their learning and their living, unless behaviours are inappropriate. (Bernie, Parent interview, Playcentre)

The onus for establishing the right type of environment, one which empowered children and also provided for their play, was an adult responsibility. While there is clearly a respect for children's rights, the perception that the adults' non-intervening role allowed for free choice ignores the fact that the 16 areas of play were pre-determined. During an interview, Donna, an experienced Playcentre parent and team leader, acknowledged the complexities of interpreting free play:

That whole free play thing is not really free. We may think we are [free] but there are still sort of rules – like you just don't take outside toys inside and you can do this or that kind of exploring, but it's influenced by what's out [the equipment], but for some people, it might be so foreign to their home environment that they'd feel really confused. (Donna, Parent interview, Playcentre)

Donna recognised a degree of ambiguity in the philosophy: If the role of the adult is to create the environment, does this suggest that the adult is more aware of the learning opportunities lying in wait to be discovered by children, if they so choose? Are learning opportunities perceived as a product of the environment? That aside, while not all adults might be aware of the learning potential in the environment, the collective experience of the co-operative creates opportunities for adults to learn, alongside children. The perception of rights was child-centred in approach, free for children, but directive for adults. Letting children be, was a theme for some parents:

Karen: They have the right to learn to be themselves. Some kids just want to do the same thing over and over again. And I think that is just fine, just to celebrate what they want to do.

Melissa: They have the right to learn to be in a learning environment.

Karen: Somebody quoted Dr Spock to me – a bit out of fashion – he said, 'love 'em, feed 'em and leave 'em alone'. I thought, [and] I was thinking of myself, 'Oh gosh, we are sometimes too in their face.'" (Karen and Melissa, Parent interview, Playcentre)

Other participants perceived the child-centred approach as "trying to empower the child to make their own decisions" (Donna, Parent interview, Playcentre). Empowerment has been a significant theme in early childhood discourses in New Zealand, particularly since *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1993, 1996). The playcentre philosophy's emphasis on a child's freedom to exercise initiative is an expression of empowerment (Carr, 2001; Nuttall, 2003). In the Playcentre setting, the adult assumed the role of facilitator, either providing actual resources, or creating conditions to both extend and support play, and this was enacted via children's and adults' participation during Playcentre sessions.

The Right to Belong, as a Child, and as a Family

Supporting children's sense of belonging was perceived by parents to be a right enacted on several levels: there were individual children's rights to belong, and family rights to belong to this Playcentre's community. Donna commented:

Playcentre is very supportive, in ways such as theoretically, like, you are taught that as a child enters, they are welcomed ... they are introduced to an activity. They need to get involved and feel a sense of belonging straight-away. So [the adults] introduce them to other children. And until they get to know about the activities, you are their buddy and you support them to make friends with the other kids. You know, you portray a feeling of being really glad to see them and happy that they're there. (Donna, Parent Interview, Playcentre)

Parents went to some lengths to include children in the Playcentre as the following illustrates. Mia was a child with special needs, and her parents felt well supported to participate, even before she began:

Melissa: [Playcentre parents] had heard about me and they were very welcoming. They felt like it was a good thing for Playcentre to have her there.

Karen: It was great. People were very welcoming.

Melissa: And especially for Mia, the whole thing of rights for her are that much more ... I don't know, uppermost I suppose, just because it's hard for her to communicate and understand what's going on. And they've been really, really fantastic. I think five of the Playcentre parents learnt sign language ... the type of sign language that she does, so that they can understand what she wants, yeah. So that sort of thing has been great. (Karen and Melissa, Parent interview, Playcentre)

Mia's right to belong, and participate, required strategies to support her needs, and complied with UNCROC Article 21, in which a child with disabilities "should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance, and facilitate the child's active participation in the community" (CRIN, 2007, p.8). The focus of Article 23 (CRIN, 2007, p.10) entitles the disabled child access to resources and opportunities. At this Playcentre, Mia's rights were enacted in real terms because some of the parents learnt sign language, and the induction processes effectively developed a sense of belonging to the Playcentre community (Te One, 2009).

Clear parallels exist between the philosophy of the Playcentre approach and UNCROC. For example, General Comment 7 (UN Committee, 2005) noted the crucial role of parents, who are required to act in the child's best interests. It is through relationship with significant others in the context of the family that children "construct personal identity, and acquire culturally valued skills, knowledge and behaviour. Parents (and other caregivers) are normally the major conduit through which young children are able to realize their rights" (Section IV, No. 13). The Playcentre parents commented that the children felt confident in the Playcentre environment because it was a family-type service. One parent described the Playcentre as "not completely child-focused, it's kind of family-focused" (Brie, Parent interview, Playcentre):

Brie: I think most of the Playcentre children, well pretty much all of the children feel comfortable and confident with the adults because they see us all so often in and out of Playcentre. It's not a teacher-pupil sort of thing, it's more like ...

Angela: I think it's more like the children probably find it more of a family, you know really close friends ... (Focus group interview, Playcentre)

The focus on the family, ensuring that families felt welcome, supported children's well being and children's rights. (see Lansdown, 2005; and the Preamble to UNCROC, CRIN, 2007, p.1). The way the environment was set up, the strategies used by the parents to encourage children to participate in the activities, a belief in children's rights to choose, and to play uninterrupted, was perceived as enhancing children's participation while they were at Playcentre.

A sense of belonging, evident in the above, identifies the parent body as an extended family and fits Rogoff's (2003) definition that a community acts coherently and with purpose. Further analysis of the dialogue resonates with concepts of children actively expressing their citizenships as users of a common space. Christensen, James and Jenks (2000, p.139) note that social space is part of social order: "Social space is part of the process of identity-making." From the Playcentre parent perspective, the social space at the Playcentre entitled children to a dedicated (and protected) place and time:

Playcentre would be the one time that my children will know that when they ask for something or they want to talk to me, I'm available to talk to them. Cos so much of the time I'm saying 'your rights and needs ... wait, wait, I'm talking, be quiet.' Whereas at Playcentre, I'm there and the adults are there to listen to them, to do what they want to ask. (Bernie, Parent interview, Playcentre)

Adults' perceptions of rights in the Playcentre supported notions of children's learning through play by nurturing children's sense of belonging to the Playcentre and by providing opportunities to explore (a facet of play), untrammelled by overly intrusive adults.

Transforming Adults' Perceptions of Children, and of Children's Rights

In her historical account of the Playcentre movement, May (2001) noted that playcentres acted as "a political community for parents" and were described by one of its founders as "an experiment in better community living" (pp. 24, 25). A service totally organised and run by parents, has to accommodate pluralistic values which blur "guidelines provided by the past" (Morris, 1994, p.11). Parents are "the experts where their own children are concerned and they should have confidence in their own decisions" (p.11). As a parent co-operative, the responsibility for providing an environment took time as well as a commitment to learning about the Playcentre approach to early education. Engagement in the Playcentre required a degree of tolerance and acceptance that in turn led to changes in parenting. This transformed some parents' perceptions of children's rights:

I think our parenting has gone through a big change. Before we shifted here, we ... didn't tend to listen to what our children wanted and we thought we were the bosses ... they do what they're told and that's end of story. So they basically didn't have many rights at all, which was quite bad! But [at] Playcentre, we started talking to a lot of other people about their approaches to children and we realised that, hang on, they are turning

into human beings, we need to acknowledge that they do have an opinion on most things and they need to be listened to, and things like that. So we sort of changed our way of thinking. (Angela, Parent interview, Playcentre)

Interactions with others in the Playcentre parent community transformed how this family acknowledged their own children's opinions, and thereby accorded their children agency in the home. Participation in the Playcentre's community of practice inducted some parents into a new paradigm where children were regarded as having opinions, hence, participation rights:

Prior to [Playcentre] we'd provide direction and structure for the kids, whereas Playcentre completely reversed that. Now it's 'children come first' – they should choose where they want to go in any given day, and I think that's wonderful. And the children's rights? I think [Playcentre] really supports children's rights. (Mike, Parent interview, Playcentre)

Parents commented that their awareness of children's rights was enhanced through belonging to the Playcentre. A shared understanding of this Playcentre's approach to child-centred free play shifted the knowledge base for some parents, which then altered how these parents perceived children's rights. Further, the Playcentre's communal base supported "the collective nature of knowledge ... we need others to complement and develop our expertise" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p.10). From a rights-based perspective, the communal base and the collective nature of knowledge shifted Angela's perceptions of her children's rights within her family as a result of her family's involvement at the Playcentre.

Accommodating Differences

The Playcentre parents believed that a child-centred approach in a free play environment supported children's rights per se, and that children had rights to uninterrupted play. However, differences in how the Playcentre's philosophy was enacted caused dilemmas in some situations. In the following example, the parent found negotiating on behalf of the younger Playcentre children a challenge:

Felicity (a parent) is wheeling Daisy (15 months, her daughter), Emily (2½ years old), and Pippa (three years old) in the trolley. She is stopped by Andy and Mikey (both three years old), Liam, and Fred (both over 4½ years old). The boys all want a turn in the trolley immediately and insist that the girls get out. They comply, and the boys try to pile in but can't fit. Felicity starts to explain about turns and how not everyone can fit. She explains that it was the girls' turn in the trolley, and when she is finished taking them around the house, 'then you [meaning the boys] can have a go.' Daisy starts to climb back in, but is blocked out by Andy. She starts to cry. 'It's our turn' the boys clamour. 'They [meaning the girls] have already had a turn.' The boys support each other to stake a claim here. Felicity decides not to continue her reasoning and begins to pull the trolley with the boys in it. The little girls stare after her. (Field notes, Day 3, Playcentre)

In this example, the confrontation with the older boys proved too difficult for Felicity to resolve fairly. Her attempts to explain about turn-taking were co-opted by the boys to justify their claim to the trolley. In a later conversation, Felicity expressed her dilemma:

'I am never quite sure how to handle those situations,' she tells me. 'You know, the boys can have a turn, but how far should I [to make it fair]? Like how free should it be?' (Field notes, Day 3, Playcentre)

Mediating between newly enrolled children and their parents (novices) and confident members of the group (experts) created tensions and conflicts. Notions of guided participation (Rogoff, 2003) and scaffolding, accepted as part of normal cultural processes can result in changes to the ways in which children and adults participate in group situations. A combination of UNCROC with theory and practice in early childhood might have resolved Felicity's awkward dilemma: all children have rights which need to be balanced with respect for the rights of others. The role of the adult is to help children form a point of view and, in the context of children's play, adults can legitimately guide children's participation (Rogoff, 1995, 1998) by explaining to children that rights are relational and context dependent:

Well, it's all about participating in the activities at Playcentre. It's our job to create an environment where you are helping [children], where you can help them and support them in their choices. (Bernie, Parent interview, Playcentre)

The right to participate in the Playcentre environment depends on more than just articulation. In this case study, parents perceived they were responsible for providing an environment that protected children's participation rights and some parents alluded to different interpretations of the words "free play", recognising that resources alone would not assure children's rights to play.

Conclusion

The parents' perceptions of children's rights focused on providing opportunities for children to participate in a culture that valued child-centred, free play. Within this setting, participants (children and adults) interacted as a community of learners (Rogoff et al., 1996) using cultural processes and practices associated with the wider playcentre movement's philosophy. Through peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), parents (via Playcentre's parent education and training programme) and children (via experiencing the Playcentre's early education programme) alike had opportunities to observe the Playcentre's philosophy in action. This led to a transformed understanding of what parenting and playing meant in the Playcentre setting.

But, like any community, different values and interpretations emerged (Rogoff, 2003). For the Playcentre parents, the playcentre movement's philosophy, together with the training courses, provided a means to mitigate differences between "communities of rule users", and "provided a type of elastic glue" (Alston, 1994, p. 19) which retained the Playcentre's integrity as a functioning, community-based early childhood setting (Te One, 2009). However, certain risks to this community potentially undermined a committed approach to facilitating children's rights to play. Limited understanding and critique of the community of practice, and the community of learners, often resulted in a stalemate situation for parents (yet another meeting), and some personal infringements of rights (in Playcentre terms) for the younger children. For example, a completely child-centred approach positions adults as passive; an adult-centred approach disempowers children but the community of learners approach (Rogoff et al, 1996) potentially empowers children and adults as actively engaging in common, cultural processes. Some practical application this theoretical concept might have eased Felicity's dilemmas with the trolley (see above), but this needed to be community-wide. From a playcentre perspective, because the parent community consists of

an ever changing group, of necessity this requires new parents to assume levels of responsibility for working with children before encountering the experience in training courses or meetings. Again, tensions in a community of practice need to be aired constructively and positively for children's rights to be supported.

In the data presented, there were plenty of opportunities to resolve differences, but the theoretical understanding of how to support conflict resolution between children was not observed during the fieldwork, or interviews (Te One, 2009). The focus on providing resources and encouraging free play failed at times to take account of the reality facing this Playcentre. Protecting children's rights to participate was difficult to achieve, and not all children, particularly two- and three-year-olds, could participate equally at all times, because it was not possible to provide resources for all children at all times.

Adults in the Playcentre believed that by providing an environment to support children's learning through play, they were supporting children's participation rights. However, merely providing resources was not enough to secure children's rights to participate; to be effective requires protecting children's rights to participate, and this was difficult at times. A rights-based approach to resolving the tensions could remove that personalised angst felt by some parents, particularly newer playcentre adherents and, securing pathways to participation through discussions could ameliorate some difficulties. The fundamental philosophical principle of empowerment and its correlating disposition: contribution, are two sides of the children's rights debates. The challenge for this Playcentre is how to more consistently enact its rights-based pedagogy of free play.

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