



Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood

Submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, on behalf of IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, Republic of Ireland

IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation represents over 2000 early childhood care and education service providers in the Republic of Ireland. The organisation advocates for a play based early childhood curriculum and supports members in implementing services that recognise the centrality of the child's well being and contribution, the child's right to active involvement in developing his/her interests, sense of identity and the community in which he/she lives. Consequently, we recognise the role of early childhood services in the areas of early learning, family support, labour market support and community development.

Within this framework, the organisation works in the areas of advocacy, training, network development, research and the development of progressive and innovative approaches to service implementation. In recent years the organisation has developed exciting approaches to an early childhood curriculum based on principles of co-participation, motivation, and reflection. In making recommendations, this paper will draw on the learning from two of these initiatives, namely, the IPPA Quality Improvement Programme and the publication 'The Power of Play'.

IPPA welcomes and celebrates, in particular, the Convention's commitment (Document CRC/C/137) to the child's right to

- preschool education, embodied in article 18
- play (article 31) in order to 'develop the child's potential skills, abilities and personality'
- be recognised as 'holders of rights and capable of exercising them in a manner consistent with their evolving capacity (article 5)
- participate in all matters affecting him or her (articles 5, 12, 13 and 17) and particularly the recognition that that participation is 'a continuous learning process for both adults and children and needs to start at the earliest stages of life as it is strongly process oriented and is based on social inter-action skill'
- child-sensitive and centred programmes and services in view of offering them a sound environment for the development of their participatory rights.

Participation & Rights

The implementation of child rights in early childhood depends, from the adult perspective, on awareness, shared values, training and resources. As an adult living or working with young children I must first be aware that children too have rights and I must believe, integrate and reflect the concept and reality of 'children's rights' in my



life. I may also need support in the form of training or resources to live and breathe a rights based approach within the context of the family, childcare service and the community. As Hindess (1993) proposes rights can only have meaning and significance where a citizen can command sufficient resources (mental as well as material) to exercise those rights.

From the perspective of the very young child, rights are an abstract concept, until the child experiences a respectful family and community where they are active players, contributing to and participating in daily life. It is not merely the actuality of having rights that is important but the perception and feelings of having rights.

As the discussion focuses on 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood' this becomes the challenge with very young children. The recommendations of IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, centre on supporting conditions and promoting strategies, within the context of the child's everyday life, which facilitates participatory rights. We propose that the voice (in its broadest sense) of the young child must be heard and attended to by significant others who are in tune with the interests and needs of the child and engages in a relationship of reciprocity.

The concept of rights is socially constructed, socially implemented and socially experienced. To exercise and experience 'rights' requires interaction with and interaction in the social world, in short participation. It is participation whereby 'one discusses common affairs with others, reflects upon the common good, learns to bear responsibility, to judge and to decide' (Voet, 1998, p.137). This is what we seek for all, including our youngest members of society, the conditions and capacity to engage in dialogue and negotiation, to be aware and reflective, to take individual and collective responsibility, to assess and take action.

Full participation in family life, in childcare settings and in society is firmly grounded in the young child's sense of self, well-being, self-agency and relationship with the enveloping social world. From the moment of birth they are poised to participate. 'There is nothing for which nature seems to have given us such a bent as for society.' (Montaigne, Essays, 1580).

Participation & Voice

It is within the microcosm of the family or community that the pattern of participation is established, that the engagement of the child as a contributor is respected and that the very young child's sense of self is enhanced by feelings of competence – 'I am and I can'. Even in societies where according to Rogoff (1990) 'young children are not expected to interact with adults as conversational peers,' responses come from other children who support and affirm involvement.

How then, in practical terms is participation of the young baby in the home / childcare institution promoted in ways that support the child's sense of self?



Participation, establishing a pattern of contribution, occurs in the detail of everyday life and is supported in the moment, however communicated.

The young infant cries! Her action involves her whole being. The very way in which she moves her body, ‘produces a unique rhythmic spatial organisation that communicates feelings and information to people around her’ (Tortora, 2004). Significant others are then personally and culturally predisposed to interpret this initiative.

According to Maria Aarts (1996) parents and significant others must know the baby to gain insight into the internal world of the child. In the crying or signalling, communication is initiated by the child. The other player in this social dance attunes to the child and makes eye contact. ‘When the adult mirrors ‘the child’s face and sounds, an interaction ensues and the baby learns to go on longer taking turns’ (Aarts, 1996). The adult or significant other follows the infant’s gaze and names what she is looking at. This simple strategy strengthens the child’s attention span, supports language acquisition but more importantly for the argument of this paper, engages the duo in a participatory situation. Such situations arise moment by moment on a day by day basis, building experience of participation.

In these early days and months, the child connects with the world through her whole body. She will attune to others, in what has been described by Stern (1985) as ‘affective resonance’ – a ‘grasp of how certain actions lead to the anger and disapproval of others, of what transgressions can be a shared source of amusement with others and of what actions can comfort a mother’s or sibling’s distress’ (Dunn, 1988). She will, through the implicit and explicit messages in this discourse, learn much of the nature of the rules of her particular culture.

It is this concept of holistic, socially, embedded, transactive, complex learning that informs IPPA’s support for play as both a learning and pedagogical tool in early childhood care and education services.

Participation & Play

We believe that play based pre-school care and education services offer a mechanism for the promotion of the rights of young children embodied in Articles 5,12,13,17,18 and 31 of the convention and outlined above. We are concerned by a shift away from a proactive role for the child in education services. Research based evidence and recent education policies indicate the enforcement of more formal, teacher directed curricula for children at a younger and younger age. Through research, Ball (1999) found that pedagogy and curricula are designed to maximise test scores and neglect the social and psychological rights of the child. Alexander et al (1995) found that teachers’ preoccupation with curriculum content and assessment dominated their pedagogy. Anning and Edwards (1999) raised concerns about early childhood education becoming more about subject content and demanding more instructional strategies. In an effort to counteract what is perceived as a decline in literacy and numeracy standards, early education is returning to a nineteenth century, labour market style pedagogy that is focussed on preparing children for the workforce from an early age.



We believe that the Convention on the Rights of the Child now needs to lead a return to the principles embodied in its articles that prioritise the child's right to a curriculum based on creativity, problem solving, investigation and participation in play. We know that children, in the early years, are in the process of meaning making, of developing social concepts about themselves and the people with whom they interact. Primarily, they need to recognise themselves as loving and loveable, as competent people whose contribution is valued, as active developers of community. These are the learning disposition that allow them to engage with meaningful learning, including literacy and numeracy and lifelong living and working skills.

In England, we now see the testing of children at age five for literacy and numeracy, In the U.S.A. we meet the 'No child left behind campaign', again introducing rigorous testing from age 5 and most recently in Ireland, the Minister for Education has announced the introduction of literacy and numeracy testing from age 7. Such directives militate against the use of play as a learning mechanism and promote a return to formal, transmission style teaching. Ball (1999) found that this pressure for performance results in teachers narrowing the classroom experience and focussing on students who testify to their teaching ability. If on the other hand, we value the child as citizen and co-creator of culture and knowledge, then we must recognise the child's right to learn through participation in cultural social activity.

Play as meaning making mechanism.

Play is dependant on voluntary, child-initiated activity. It is common to the young and old of the species and even across species. Play is universal yet play themes and scripts are local, situated in and part of a cultural community. It is based on life experience but offers children the opportunity to move out of the frame of reality and into the frame of pretence (Bateson 1956) to represent and renegotiate their learning. In the early years, Gussin Paley (1997) tells us 'an intuitive programme called play, works so well that the children learn the language, mannerisms and meaning of all the people with whom they live. They know what every look means, every tone of voice, who their family is, where they come from, what makes them happy or sad, what place they occupy in the world'. They learn these very complex concepts through playful, pleasurable participation in complex social activity. Children play their way into community scenarios that allow them to engage with real life learning. Children learn to negotiate, to compromise, to develop a theory of mind (Leslie 1987), to direct and choreograph within the complexity of the social activity. Play is the antidote to the rigidity of successful ecological adaptation, according to Sutton Smith (1997). It keeps us alert and open to change. 'Play's engineered predicaments model the struggle for survival. Play actualises what are otherwise only potential brain and behaviour connections' (p229). So, not only does play allow children to engage with existing communities of practice but they are invited to engage with the imaginary, the possible and even the impossible. In the process, 'the child is a head taller than himself' (Vygotsky 1976), so empowered, so in control is he or she.



With this lens to observe play, we can see children imaginatively create a world based on their previous and combined experiences, which they can direct and to which they can belong. In the 'Power of Play' (IPPA, Brennan 2004) all the stories demonstrate how children negotiate meaning and scaffold each other in imaginative and creative ways as they experiment with possible selves in dramatic pretend play. These experiments bring them into a range of communities, each of which has specific goals, specific valued behaviours, rules and routines. Rogoff (1990 p39) draws parallels between the roles of young children and the roles of novices in apprenticeship. They both actively try to make sense of new situations and put themselves in a position to learn. The apprenticeship model often involves a group of novices who are a resource to one another in developing skill and understanding. They differ in levels of expertise and act, within the group, both as teachers and learners. Again, she could be describing play groups when she says (p39) 'the model provided by apprenticeship is one of active learners in a community of people who support, challenge and guide novices as they increasingly participate in skilled and valued socio-cultural activity'. As children become more familiar with one another, we know that the play scenes are repeated and the play becomes more complex. With practice, children are quicker to move into role and more knowledgeable and skilled in meeting the demands of the role. If planning is part of that role, then children practice planning. If literacy is important then children engage with literacy. If counting is important, they learn to count. And of course, if creativity or co-operation is valued in that pretence community, children learn these skills. Lave and Wenger (1999) describe expertise as moving towards fuller participation in a 'community of practice'. Children need opportunities to participate in order to become more expert in their communities. These are skills that cannot be learned without engaging with the complexity of living situations, as children do in play.

Play as pedagogy.

In a society where children have little access to the working lives of adults, pretend play becomes all the more important. It is both a learning and teaching tool. It allows children to enter and experience many communities of practice that in real life they can only observe from a distance or on a television screen. In other societies, children, through a process of guided participation (Rogoff 1990), are initiated into the trades and survival skills of adults from a very young age. We know that in Western industrialised societies children play more and adults encourage them and engage in play (Goncu 1999). Perhaps this is the culture's way of compensating for children's exclusion from real life learning/apprenticeship opportunities. Play is the child's right, it is a significant contributor to the child's well being (Sutton Smith 1997) and in terms of early childhood education it is the obvious mechanism for 'promoting the child as right-holder' (CRC/C/137 pp4)

When we recognise children as competent, agentive, co-constructing citizens, it allows us to see the experiences children bring to play and to recognise the cultural communities that have already impacted on their learning and identity. It prompts us to question what we value as learning and indicates that any redirection in that learning must be negotiated with the important communities in the child's life. Consequently child-centredness must mean the child in the context of family and community. Any education process must



recognise the transactional nature of that relationship and empower the child as an agentive participant. This view of learning has major implications for childcare practice and underpins IPPA's total conviction that play offers children and society the most productive and at the same time most pleasurable mechanism for facilitating the right of the child to participation in and influence his or her own learning and to communicate his or her feelings, skills and values. Play themes are the link between family, practitioner and community, bringing together the broader life and experience of the child into the meaning making web.

Consensus among practitioners.

While we recognise that there is a body of knowledge in each discipline that is important and that must be passed on from generation to generation and that there is individual variation in ability to progress useful knowledge or that some knowledge in our society is more useful in achieving worthwhile societal goals, we also recognise the complexity of human activity and knowing. We propose that in order to engage with the abstracted learning of school, children first need time to make sense of the complex, concrete learning that can only happen within its related cultural context. We believe this learning is best facilitated through play. We are fortunate to work in the area of early childhood where it is easier to reach a consensus that young children need first and foremost to adapt to their environment and to make sense of the world and their place within it. In our experience that consensus exists among practitioners in the field. Difficulties arise in convincing the policy makers and consequently in accessing resources to make play work in centre based services.

Participation & Citizenship

The right of the child to participate in family, day-care and community life as outlined above, is fundamental to well-being in its own right, but also as the basis of citizenship and social capital.(Putnam, 2000). Taken from another perspective, if active citizenship and social capital are aspirations of or valued within society, then the participatory rights of young children must be implemented. In some cultures children are educated *for* citizenship, an additional subject that is included in the curriculum at primary or second level. IPPA propose that models, such as those described within the IPPA Quality Improvement Programme, which support children's participatory rights in early childhood also influence dispositions towards active citizenship (Mayor, 1999).

Citizenship depends, according to Drake (2001), on the relationship between membership, participation, entitlements and obligations. As concepts of citizenship relates to early childhood, it might translate as:

- Membership having a sense of belonging, of 'I' and 'We' (I am)
- Participation being a contributor with a voice that is heard and effects change (I do)
- Entitlements being a rights-holder who exercises those rights respectfully (I can)
- Obligations having a sense of duty to self and others within society (I must).

When society fails to embrace and support the participation of young children, they become the voiceless and powerless adults of the next generation.



Participation & Barriers

Children can participate to the extent that they are allowed to by significant others in their lives, by the norms of their culture within their community, and by the political context within which they live. Participation brings with it a sense of belonging and a sense of ‘making a difference.’ Without this people become disconnected from neighbours/others, disenfranchised from civic engagement and apathetic to the political/democratic system.

So, while we argue that participation occurs on a moment by moment basis in the simplicity of contributing to a dialogue or engaging in play, there are parallel social and policy developments which must occur and all of which require political will.

These early strands of citizenship must be placed within a framework of civil, social and political rights (Marshall, 1992) or as Turner (1993) further postulates welfare, economic and educational rights. Dooley (2002) reminds us that ‘policies that affect children go well beyond traditional ‘children’s issues’ and over a wide range of financial and resource allocation decisions that constitute the basic framework of public policy development. Poverty and Social exclusion are barriers to participation and full citizenship which can result in apathy or quiescence which according to Freire, (1973), can become so strong that ‘people may even come to maintain their own powerlessness and so oppress themselves’ (Drake, 2001).

Powerlessness derives from an image of oneself as powerless. Those working with young children, consequently, have a responsibility to build the identity of the child as a competent contributor. This shift from the needy to the competent child has energised the work of IPPA and is reflected in the action research approach of the IPPA Quality Improvement Programme. Furthermore, the IPPA publication ‘Power of Play: A Play Curriculum in Action’ documents the competencies demonstrated by children as they play in Irish childcare services. From a front row seat, we engage with awe inspiring creativity that leaves us with no choice but to recognise each and every child’s right, regardless of ability or cultural background, to have his/her voice heard and to negotiate their own lives as citizens.



Recommendations.

IPPA call on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to:

- 1. Insert a new article into the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which enlarges the notion of play.**

As stated in Article 31 play is linked with leisure and recreational pursuits. This could lead to some narrow interpretations such as the opposite of work. While play can indeed be recreational, it has much more significance in the lives of children. The child's right to play promotes well-being, agency and life long learning.

- 2. Commit member states to incorporate play as a central mechanism for learning in early childhood and as such underpins all early childhood curricula.**

Play is an intrinsic human capacity which when culturally supported finds myriad modes of expression that lead to well-being, learning and development. This spontaneous behaviour has a harmonising effect on holistic learning of children. Play is a process and an outcome of being a participant within a particular culture. It is an expression of a particular culture and a means of influencing culture. This is why play is vital as a central mechanism for learning in early childhood and as such, should underpin all curricula.

- 3. Commit member states to engage in research on play and in particular research that recognises the child's right to participate and contribute.**

We need to know and understand children, as they exist in their own generation using sound research practices, and not to imagine that our adult-oriented knowledge of childhood reflects adequately their reality. Data to date on children and childhood are adult and institution oriented.



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