Empowerment Framework

Subjects: Education & Educational Research
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The empowerment framework (EF) is a tool for capturing children's involvement in their play environment and with their peers. It exposes what they are interested in and how they are learning through that process. The EF was designed as a conceptual framework, developed through PhD research with seven case-study children and families.

children's empowerment   participation   voice   ownership

1. Introduction

Play is important for children; it is where they explore, try out new things, and voice their opinions. It is a vehicle for nurturing their interest and provides a platform for exploring curiosity and creativity [1]. Children's active engagement in play supports their cognitive and physical development as they bring what they already know to their play and build on or experiment with their knowledge and understanding. Children also enter play situations with experiences from home, their family, and community [2]. The combination of children's social interactions and bringing their own understanding and interpretations of the world provide an irresistible foundation for creativity, exploration, and curiosity. Coupled with this, the environments children encounter and are able to engage with further compound the desire for children to play and imagine.

The empowerment framework (EF) [3] is a tool for capturing children's involvement in their play environment and with their peers. It exposes what they are interested in and how they are learning through that process. The EF was designed as a conceptual framework, developed through PhD research with seven case-study children and families. The challenge of the EF is that it requires a shift in thinking from recording *what* children do or achieve to *how* children do something and how they interact with their environment and those around them. It is based on three guiding themes of participation, voice, and ownership, which are significant in contributing to empowering experiences.

2. Empowerment

The term empowerment is an elusive concept. It is often defined in relation to business or community action rather than Early Childhood [4]. Yet empowerment is a fundamental quality that most individuals desire. It is complex because people do not feel empowered all of the time, it is a process or a feeling, and requires certain elements to be in place for empowering experiences to occur [3]. Although other approaches to early years education contain the sentiments of empowerment such as Reggio Emilia in Italy and Te Whariki in New Zealand, they are centred

around their own cultural identities. Carr's learning stories offer an approach to assessment which gives a voice to young children though assessment that can shape learning and reflect pedagogical thinking [5]. In the same way this research puts children's empowerment as the most significant element for observation and a foundation for understanding an individual child. A framework based on the core elements of empowerment can transcend different cultures, contexts, and circumstance in the same way that Carr's learning stories developed an approach to assessment. A framework concentrating on what it is that significantly contributes to a child's engagement is valuable in furthering understanding about the way in which children learn and develop.

Empowerment in children's play follows an argument that it is not one single action, event, or circumstance. It is concerned with examining individual choices and decisions based on social interactions, emotional responses, and environmental influences within situated boundaries and resources. However, there are essential components that contribute to children's experiences of empowerment: these are Participation, Voice, and Ownership.

3. Participation

Participation in play is significant to the process of empowerment because the nature of participation shapes and directs what is happening and can potentially change or develop children's interests or build capacity for on-going play [6]. How children decide to participate in play is significant. They may negotiate their way into a play situation or be more assertive through taking the lead and instructing other children. They may challenge themselves through pushing their physical limits or encourage other children to try something new in order to sustain a play situation. Children may use their initiative to change a game, or focus of play, to ensure it continues. Becoming involved in established play is also an emotional risk children take in joining in for the first time or expressing their interest in case they are rejected by the group. Active participation requires being involved, by investing in social interactions with others and risking an emotional investment in caring about what is going on and wanting to be part of that situation [7]. However, active participation can also imply empowerment of those involved in the sense 'that children believe and have reason to believe that their involvement will make a difference' [8] (p. 111).

Participation is more than expressing individual choice and is part of a broader experience of belonging and feeling valued [9]. Thus, children in play may become powerful social participants in their own right as play allows them to express their preferences and interests. Where these are accepted by other children, this signals that their views are important [7]. Participation, therefore, has a wider meaning in that it is not just about the connections children make with their peers; it is also about children being able to make choices and having opportunities to be curious. It also supports pathways for children to explore and feel included or wanted as part of play. In its widest sense, participation is significant to the process of empowerment because motivation for being part of play comes from the child and subsequently can be sustained for as long as children's interests remain active.

4. Voice

Through play children have opportunities to observe behaviour, copy each other, see how others respond to them and those around them and deal with others' expectations and feelings, however these are expressed [10]. In this research, children's voice is defined as the way in which children explore how they can express their views not only through speaking but through their actions, body language, gestures, or where they position themselves within a group of children [11]. In child-initiated social play children have certain choices in what they do as well as what they choose not to do which demonstrates to other children their preferences and how strongly they feel about them [12]. Children can also manage other children's responses not only to their verbal communication, but their actions and consequences of their actions [13].

Children's spoken voice does not always reflect the reality of their experiences; what children say is not always the whole story of what they want or need [14]. Often children's voice is examined within the context of adult–child relationships [15]. However, children's voice is also relevant in child–child relationships and particularly in play situations where children may demonstrate different social and emotional skills in using different modes of expression effectively. Expressing an opinion amongst other children who also have opinions requires confidence and self-assurance, especially in a large social group. Through different ways of communicating with their peers, and having their opinions valued and heard by others, children are more willing to contribute their thoughts and ideas, not only by what they say, but also by what they do [7][16].

Empowerment in children's play manifests itself through children expressing their point of view in agreement or if it differs from others; and using different modes of expression to show their preferences [17]. This may be through making decisions about the materials or resources they want to play with, the space they want to play in, and the timing of their play. There is an interconnectedness between children's voice and participation in play, as the more children want to be involved, the more opinions they have about the direction of their play. This also supports the process of creativity and imagination where all forms of communication between children is important for play to evolve, be negotiated and contain a certain amount of compromise so that everyone involved achieves a sense of satisfaction [18]. Children quickly realise in child–child play interactions that if their participation is too dominant or if they attempt to force their views on others, they are often left playing alone [10]. Therefore, children's participation and voice are closely associated with the process of empowerment as part of experiencing and building social relationships, being involved in play, having ideas affirmed or ignored, and building capacity to be adaptable and flexible in play situations [19].

5. Ownership

Children want to feel that they are part of something, for example a family, an early childhood setting, or part of a wider community [20]. When children have a sense of ownership they engage with and support other children through their actions and interest in what is happening around them [21]. Having control or ownership of something helps children feel secure and confident in what they are doing. It is powerful because children feel comfortable and secure in the situation, have knowledge about what might happen and are familiar with the other children around them [22]. Ownership supports active interest and engagement in contributing and influencing what is happening and taking a leading role in the development of play. Therefore, recognising children have a vested

interest in their play environment supports the validity of their play agenda, allowing children to follow their own interests and come to their own conclusions [19].

The term ownership is a deliberate choice because it is personal to the child's individual experiences. In any given situation there are always external factors that have greater influence over what a child is able to do and the choices they can make; for example, boundaries are set by an adult, time is controlled by the daily routine, choice of what to do or who to play with is set by the resources available and the structure of classes. Within all of these rules and regulations, children can have the opportunity to 'own' for themselves something that is interesting or important to them.

When children are able to engage with materials in different and creative ways, they have the opportunity to express independent thought and be able to follow it through to a conclusion of their own satisfaction. It is an emotive response of being included and a tangible experience of sharing something that has happened, been created, or achieved together. Children's actions and the way they develop play when it consists of their own ideas and experimentations supports a sense of owning the materials and space and what they can do with them. Through the ownership of play, common interests also emerge in the interactions between children; they begin to seek out each other to play with and often the same themes and games appear. When children cooperate, working towards the same goal or purpose, their play supports the sense that they are in control of the immediacy of their environment.

Ownership reaffirms familiarity in the processes of common practices which often reflect children's particular community and culture [20][22]. When there is a sense of ownership in children's play there may also be characteristics of group cohesiveness in working together, coming up with creative solutions to problems and children feeling able to express their personality and emotions [16]. These connections are significant to the development of being empowered. Ownership relates closely to children's knowledge and how they use that knowledge to support the development of their play and involve others [23]. However, it does not have to be the physical ownership of an object but can also be ownership of an emotion or memory. Children might share a smile between them, remembering when they last played the same game, or express themselves through their physical movement, sharing the same feeling [3].

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