

# Assessing Child Initiated Play: *Illusion or Reality?*



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## Example: Counting

“In these scenes the child will be asked to count items on the screen”.

(ASSESSMENT PROFILE ON ENTRY FOR CHILDREN AND TODDLERS 2015-2016)





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## Example: Handwriting

Ask the child to write their full name on a piece of paper (not copying from an example). Assess the quality of the child's writing and assign a score between 0 and 5 by clicking on the appropriate box.

- Score 0 if no attempt is made to write their name or if marks that are made are unrecognisable as writing
- Score 1 if there is an attempt to imitate print although most of the letters are impossible to read
- Score 2 if the writing includes one or two recognisable letters, but less than half of the letters are recognisable
- Score 3 if over half the letters in the writing are recognisable. Some letters may be reversed
- Score 4 if all the letters are recognisable and no letters are reversed. Upper and lower case letters may be used incorrectly
- Score 5 if first and last names are written with the appropriate use of capital letters and all letters well formed with consistent letter size

(ASSESSMENT PROFILE ON ENTRY FOR CHILDREN AND TODDLERS 2015-2016)



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## Example: Letter Identification

Towards the end of the assessment, there are several questions that ask the child to identify specific letters. The letter is indicated in the bottom text box. Point out the appropriate letter on the wall frieze on the on-screen picture of Tariq's bedroom for the child to identify. Accept either the sound or the name of the letter as correct. Do not accept rhymes or other words such as 'Letterland' characters.

(ASSESSMENT PROFILE ON ENTRY FOR CHILDREN AND TODDLERS 2015-2016)



# Assessing Child Initiated Play: *Illusion or Reality?*

- Play as a journey or play as an adventure?
- Separating reality from illusion: the antinomies of play and assessment;
- Research Context : Participatory action research (PAR);
- Report on the six cycles of the PAR;
- Final thoughts.



# Play as a journey or an adventure?

- There is a consensus of the value of play as a powerful element in children's well-being, development and as a cultural tool to make sense of the world;
- The concept of play keeps being re-examined and reinvented and associated with learning and development as a means of understanding it and applying it effectively for educational purposes (Brooks et al 2014)



# Play as a journey or an adventure?

- Both Piaget and Vygotsky emphasise the importance of play in children's development. It is considered a critical behaviour in the development of mental structures, representational abilities and language.
- Play also occurs, as Vygotsky (1978) argued, within the zone of proximal development, and is a "learning opportunity" that helps children come to terms with new ways of seeing and understanding their physical and social world.
- Play can be seen as the link between early and later forms of understanding, which is a central issue in cognitive development and should also be a central issue in education in early childhood..
- Motivated by the pleasure of playing or working together, children are resolving their differences through exploration, discussion, and concluding children jointly construct a new cognitive structure, which initiates changes in each participant's individual cognitive structures.
- Verba (1993), in an attempt to extend this view, suggests that children co-operate, are willing to listen each other, to be explicit, to take each other's perspective and to resolve possible conflicts, again in the form of play.



# Play as a journey or an adventure?

- Vygotsky argues that learning and development involve establishing shared thinking which then is the basis for the joint construction of new, more comprehensive and advanced conceptual structures.
- In play, Vygotsky argued, children create an imaginary situation that exists “intersubjectively” in which they can experiment with cultural meanings, social roles and rules.
- Cognitive theory and socio-cultural theory implies that the focus is more on the child as an active learner who interacts with the physical and social environment. Both recognise that play is an essential activity for children and ***a profound highly complex mental function.***



# Play as a journey or an adventure?

Those who advocate the holistic approach and those who support either constructive or socio-cultural theories both recognise, however, that play is an essential activity for children and despite theoretical differences it cannot be disconnected from how “it is situated within the micro and macro politics of teaching, learning curriculum and childhoods, both locally and globally” (Brooks et al 2014: 3).





# Separating illusion from reality: The antinomies of play and assessment

The most daring dimension of play is that it is an adventure (= not knowing the end outcome) as opposed to the notion of a journey (= the outcomes are set and fixed and can be assessed) and the only given reality are the actions of children during play.

The recognition of a child initiated play as an adventure is thus the ontological significance of play;

In that sense play itself cannot be assessed as that would be unnatural and a fallacy in relation to its ontological significance.



## Separating illusion from reality: The antinomies of play and assessment

At policy level the role of the adult as “assessors” of children’s play as a learning process leads to the search for a number of types of interactions besides social interactions and are products of a culture that requires the child to perform a number of tasks in order to “fit in boxes”





# Separating illusion from reality: The antinomies of play and assessment

- Assessing children's play with box based tasks is thus anomalous as "play derives from child's mental structure and can be explained only by that structure" (Nikolpoulou, 1993:4).
- Play does not have an "end", but is based on the notion of adventures.





# Separating illusion from reality: The antinomies of play and assessment

Play should be seen instead as an accomplished union of mental functions, sociocultural world and veritable “resurrection” of nature, all of which create opportunities for children to come to terms with their humanism.





# Conclusions:

- If we try to fit play into a “laboratory model” to evaluate development, we miss the social imaginative aspects of play;
- The origins of child initiated play are outside the classroom, indeed, outside the common imagination of a learning environment;
- Learning environments as a model for organizing learning and child initiated play can be fundamentally oppressive: they force learning into a narrow schedule and space and simultaneously reinforce the notion that learning does not happen in important ways anywhere else.
- a ... major illusion on which the learning environments rests is that most learning is the result of teaching. “Teaching, it is true, may contribute to certain kinds of learning under certain circumstances. But most people acquire most of their knowledge outside school, and in school only insofar as school, in a few rich countries, has become their place of confinement during an increasing part of their lives”. Illich (1970:12)
- As a place of confinement, both physically and psychologically, early childhood learning environments become a place where children learn to look to authority figures and experts for answers and come to recognize only a certain set of “knowledges” as legitimate.
- ***In that sense is assessment and documentation of child initiated play reality or illusion?***



# Research Context :

- The aim was to collaborate with practitioners who were agonising as to how they could assess child initiated play to meet government requirements.
- The basic purpose of the project was to ascertain whether ***assessing children's play can become reality or is an illusion*** and, if possible, to explore how such an outcome could be achieved.





# Research Context:

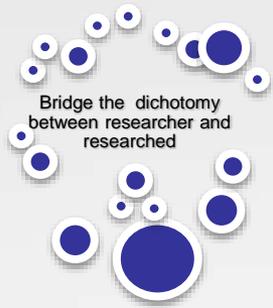
The aims were to identify:

- a) Elements of child initiated play with the practitioners;
- b) Strategies which can be used to participate as partners in children's initiated play;
- c) Ways (if any) of assessing children's initiated play;





# Research Design



Bridge the dichotomy  
between researcher and  
researched



Participatory Action  
Research



Ethics: A collective  
praxis approach



Dialectics of Praxis and  
Praxeology



Communicative Praxis



Participants become  
researchers :  
( knower and known )





# Why Participatory Action Research?

María Elena Torre's "*contact zone*" (a space) where:

1. each participant is understood to be a carrier of knowledge and history,
2. everyone holds a sincere commitment to creating change for educational justice,
3. power relationships are explicitly addressed within the collaborative,
4. disagreements and disjuncture are excavated rather than smoothed over
5. there is a collective expectation that both individuals and the group are "under construction".

Torre, M.E. (Forthcoming). The alchemy of integrated spaces: Youth participation in research collectives of difference. In L. Weis & M. Fine (Eds.) *Beyond Silenced Voices*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.



# Why participatory action research?

- Because it echoes Foucault's (1994:288) reluctance to dictate "how things should be" and wrote provocatively to disrupt equilibrium and certainty, so that "all those who speak for others or to others" no longer know what to do.
- In that sense, Derrida's notion of testing "aporias" becomes relevant to this research project.



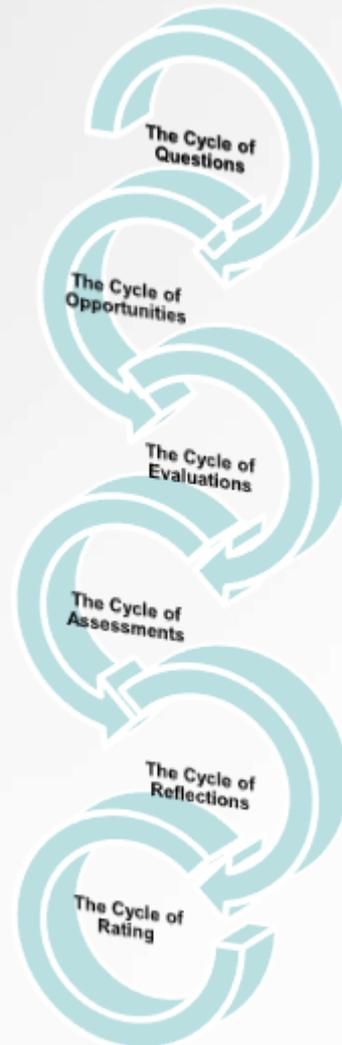
## Research tools:

- Self observations;
- Observations;
- Interviews-focus groups;
- Video /digital techniques.





# Research Context: The Cycles





## Step 1: Who are we and who will be involved? (The cycle of *Questions*)

### Ontological insecurities, anxieties, phobias of EY practitioners :

- What is child initiated play about?
- Do I make a selection of resources from which children choose?
- How will I know that they learn?
- How much time should I devote to child initiated learning?
- What is the “right”/“appropriate” *balance* between child initiated learning and adult directed activities?
- Do children learn more effectively through direct experience or tuition?
- What are children learning that is direct relevance to curriculum goals?
- What do children need to learn to be able to engage successfully in play?
- What is “educational” play?
- ***What is my role then? Who am I?***

***Emotions!!***



## Step 1: Who are we and who will be involved? (The cycle of *Questions*)

### Characteristics of child initiated play

- Is child chosen.
- Is child inspired.
- Is child invented.
- Is child directed.
- Is child led.
- Is child managed.
- Is child self regulated.
- Is pretend but done as if the activity is real.
- Focuses on the doing.
- Is done by the children and not the adults.
- Requires active involvement.
- Is fun.

### Benefits of child initiated play

- Reality and imagination.
- Everyday worlds and play worlds.
- Past, present and future.
- The logical and the absorb.
- The known and the unknown.
- The actual and the possible.
- Safety and risk.
- Structure and flexibility.
- Chaos and order.



## Step 2: Learning environments: The voice of the participants (The cycle of Opportunities)

**How** we can create learning environments where it facilitates child play **offering**:

- Opportunities where children could try things for themselves;
- Experiences that allowed children to practise independence from an early stage;
- Role models of adults and other children;
- Expectations where children felt they could achieve a certain task or activity in an attempt to support them becoming independent learners;
- Motivation – created by rewarding and praising effort and success;
- Information – to empower them to make choices and decisions.

# Step 3: Quality Check

## (the cycle of *Evaluations*)



- Do we give this area of the curriculum the status it deserves?
- Do we observe children, document and feedback what we say by sharing photos and writing down words?
- Are the resources for all the areas well organised, attractive, well maintained, high quality and in sufficient supply?
- Do they stimulate and sustain interest and involvement?
- Do we encourage/allow children to mix materials from all areas?
- Do we encourage children to develop their play?
- Do children feel comfortable combining sets of equipment to extend play?
- Can children move from area to another area following their interests?
- Do we encourage children to integrate other materials, revisit activities, refer to books during their play?
- Do we discuss projects with children, allowing them time and space to make links in their learning through discussion and sensitive suggestions?
- Do we consult them when buying or collecting new items for our areas?
- Have we worked with the parents and carers?
- Have we involved children in decision making?
- Do children have independent access to all areas?
- Do we involve children in the management and maintenance of the areas?
- Do we have enough resources?
- Are there opportunities for children to pursue activities (indoors and outdoors)?
- Do we offer equal opportunities to all children to participate in all aspects of the learning environment?
- Do we encourage children and parents to contribute ideas, resources and expertise?
- Do we support children to take the lead in activities?
- Do we support children to design their activities?



## Step 4: Assessing child initiated play (the cycle of Assessments)

### Concerns:

- take over child initiated play either physically or verbally;
- should be co-players with children;
- should allow decision making to be made by children and to what extent;
- were aware about the physical boundaries as an adult and of the power relationship between adults and children.

# Step 4: Assessing child initiated play (the cycle of Assessments)



Characteristics	Where does it happen? (area and materials)	Observation (brief)	Links with EYFS areas
Child chooses from a range of materials			
Child chooses from a range of activities			
Child instructs an activity			
Child directs an activity			
Child leads an activity			
Child manages an activity			
Child self regulates during an activity			
Child engages in all the aspects of the activity			
Child talks about his/her ideas and achievements			
Child uses materials in unexpected ways			
Child uses a variety of interaction strategies			
Child is willing to tackle/take a new challenge			
Child creates a new challenge			
Child creates "new" material			
Child suggests new material or activities			

# Step 4: Assessing child initiated play (the cycle of Assessments)



Statements	Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly agree 5
1. I wanted to be in control of the activity					
1. I wanted to instruct					
1. I wanted to talk explaining each step					
1. I want to check if everyone was completing the task correctly					
1. I let the others to make decisions by themselves					
1. I felt comfortable if someone else took the lead					
1. I felt my ideas were heard					
1. I communicated effectively with others					
1. I took a firm stand acting with certainty					
1. I tried to understand others and compromised my ideas in order to work as a team					
1. I tried to get along with others					
1. I felt that my team needed to be supervised closely otherwise they are not likely to carry on the task					
1. I felt I was providing guidance throughout the activity					
1. I felt I needed directions					
1. I felt it did not matter if I did not complete the task as I wanted to enjoy the experience					
1. I expected my team would do a good job					
1. I was not interested to make it perfect as I wanted to have fun					
1. I wanted to offer directions					
1. I wanted to guide the team throughout					
1. I wanted to support the team making decisions					
<b>Total score</b>					



# Step 5: Reflection of teaching style (the cycle of *Reflections*)



Adult directed

**1**

Supportive

**2**

Child Initiated

**3**





## Step 6: Rating our actions: (the cycle of *Rating*)

- Adaptation of Self Assessment of adult involvement in children's play.
- Adaptation of Child Initiated Assessment questionnaire.



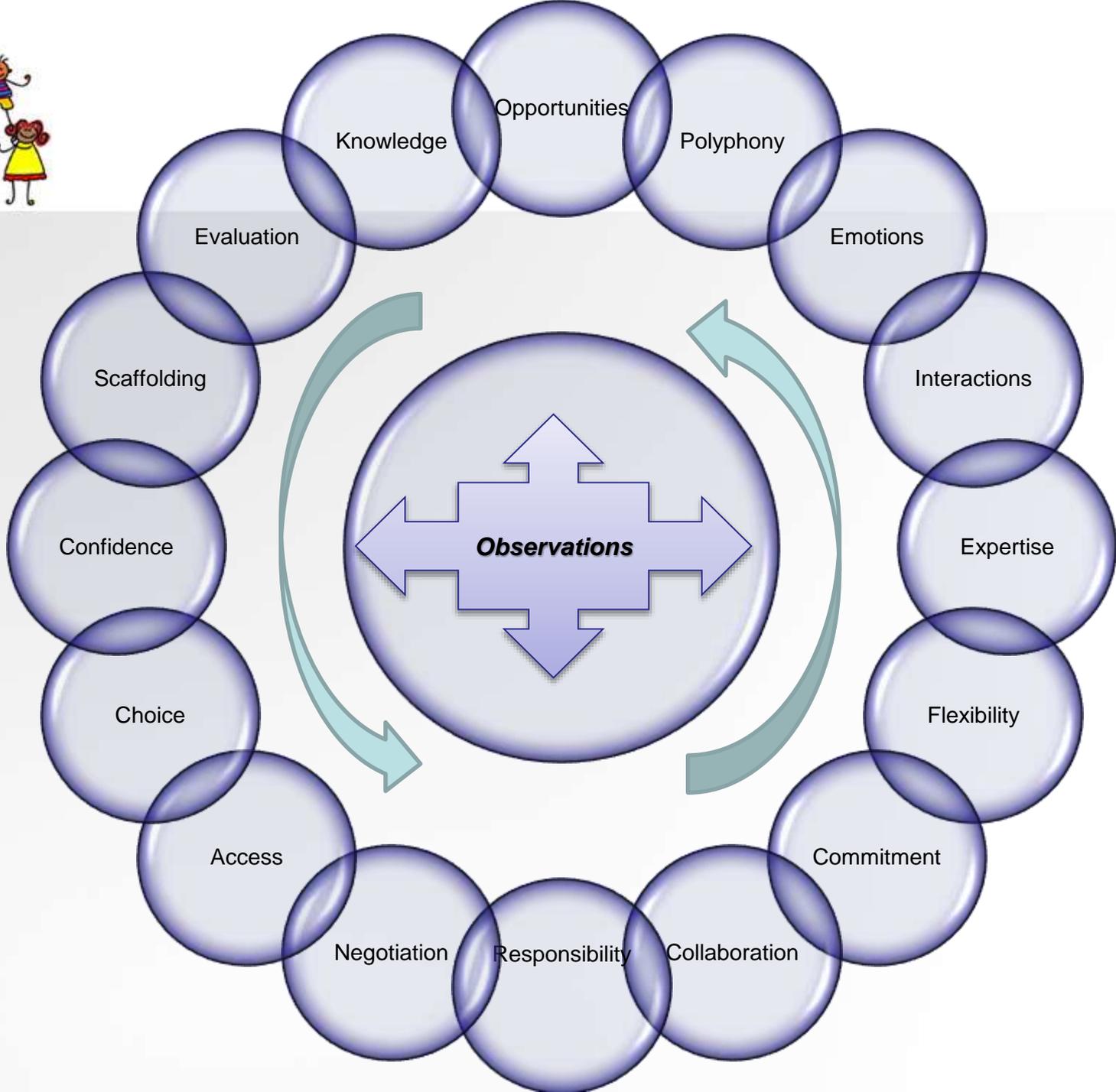


# Conclusions (1/3)

- It became evident throughout the project that assessment of children and, in particular child initiated play, is to borrow a term from Derrida (1962) an “impossible intervention”. All the participants in the project felt that child initiated play has a number of characteristics, but it is impossible to assess it. What is possible is to identify whether it happens or not.
- Attempts to assess child initiated play cannot be undertaken without exploration of natural possibilities.
- The need emerged for practitioners to stop agonising on how to assess child initiated play and move instead into considering how they can assess the learning environment and capture the hidden and deeper meanings and profound mental functions that child initiated play carries.
- Child initiated play as a semiotic system has intellectual operations and structures and the crucial factor is not to consider each function separately, but to consider the changing relationships between different functions such as memory, problem solving, language and how children are using them in order to make sense of the world around them.

# Conclusions (2/3)







# Conclusions (3/3)

## ***Illusions:***

- Assessing child's play in a functional, administrative way
- Attempting to harmonise play functions by assigning them directly with government requirements of assessment actually separates children's play from its natural status.
- Completing the EYFS requirements of assessing children's play as a learning journey which sought an end product is in direct conflict with children's intuitions of their play.
- Instead there is a need for detachment from those conditions and the formation of a more complete process based on the realisation that children are trying to find themselves and realise their humanism when they play.

## ***Reality:***

- Seek to contextualise each early childhood setting as an independent situation where a child cumulative explores all intellectual procedures, skills and operations.
- Each setting should investigate their internal processes and develop their own techniques with the formation of concepts that represent their cultural locality.
- Assessment, therefore, should be about all the natural opportunities of evaluating children's play rather than focusing in the intrinsic dependence on specific adult oriented "knowledge" of how children should use play.
- Empowering practitioners with the means to evaluate the learning environment and to provide an alternative and more holistic way of assessing play in early childhood than offered by the EYFS – in other words, a reality rather than an illusion



## Final thought:

*“I could not think of it that way, but I can see now...assessing the children that’s not a constructive way to look at it. It’s not like, I’m not...we’re not...we should not try to assess the children by keeping ourselves outside of this... its not like we are outside looking in or inside looking out at this whole issue—what I learned , because its affecting me. And so it’s affecting everybody. Are we all in the same situation?”*

*That’s...it is..it seems the only way we can do this ... discussing together is really... is a forward thinking, or moving as we need to get to where we want to go, for the children. When we all understand and work for the same ... having such different experiences and such different views, and then we are all coming together to work for the same goal it adds ...so many different levels. But...we learned to ask more questions each other and come up with more solutions... when we are coming together”.*

*(Quote from EY practitioner)*



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