Pretend play: the affordances of flexible spaces, places and things for an interest based curriculum

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Abstract
This paper examines the affordances of environments for pretend play in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. It draws on data from a government-sponsored study of young children’s experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage in England, focusing on children’s (3-5 years) perspectives across a sample of 15 case study settings. The paper considers children’s experiences of the affordances for pretend play of the spaces, places and things in their settings. Researchers engaged in participant observation during child-led tours of settings and during play; they made digital picture books with children; and carried out informal interviews, looking with children at their profiles. A key finding is that flexible spaces, places and things can support young children in exploring a wide range of interests and related funds of knowledge through pretend play. This suggests a need to re-evaluate the characteristics of play environments as a key dimension of ECEC pedagogy and to identify those characteristics that can support young children’s agency in developing pretend play themes matched to their wide-ranging interests and related funds of knowledge.

Key words: pretend, environments, flexible, early childhood, interests

Introduction
Developmental psychologists contest the functions of pretend play in early childhood (Smith 2005). Nevertheless, pretend, identified, for example, as ‘role play’ and ‘imaginative play’, is recognised as an important element of the early childhood curriculum for ‘expressive arts and design’ in England (DfE 2012), and is similarly recognised in influential curriculum frameworks internationally, for example, Te Whariki in New Zealand (Ministry of Education 1996). It is therefore important to note a divergence in views about the related pedagogy to support pretend play. While realism is commonly the dominant feature of practitioners’ planned environments for pretend, some researchers have argued against this approach, highlighting instead the affordances for children’s engagement in pretend of more flexible and loosely defined spaces, places and things (Drummond and Jenkinson; Broadhead 2012).

This paper reports findings from a study of young children’s views about the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England (Garrick et al. 2010), undertaken as a part of the Tickell (2011) review of the EYFS framework and related guidance (DCFS 2008a; DCSF 2008b; DCSF 2008c). The paper focuses, in particular, on findings that relate to the perspectives of three to five years olds on pretend play experiences in different early years settings. It explores the following questions:

- What are young children’s experiences and their views about pretend play across a range of early years settings?
- What are the affordances of different play environments for the engagement of young children in pretend and the development of a curriculum based on children’s interests?
The study’s sample of sixteen early years settings represented the range of settings in England, selected from two government regions in the North of England. Most settings offered realistic role-play provision, such as home-corners, shops and a police station. In contrast, a few settings provided more flexible and loosely defined spaces, places and things for pretend play, in some cases alongside realistic provision. The findings highlight the affordances of such flexible environments for pretend play for children in the 3 to 5 year age group, suggesting a significant pedagogical role for practitioners in planning such play environments. However, rather than focusing on the adult role in planning learning environments, recent discussions of pedagogy centre on the adult role in interaction with young children, in particular supporting ‘sustained shared thinking’ (Siraj-Blatchford 2010). This paper, therefore, argues that there is to widen discussions of early years pedagogy, to ensure consideration of the pedagogical role of practitioners in the design of play environments to support children’s engagement in play themes matched to their interests and to related funds of knowledge (Hedges et al 2010).

**Context**

The DfE study (Garrick et al 2010) set out to explore children’s perspectives on four main aspects of their early education and care experiences, including their experiences of play. This paper draws on a sub-set of data relating to children’s experiences of pretend play. The EYFS framework (DFES 2008a) under review has a clear focus on imaginative and role-play as aspects of young children’s creative development, enabling children to express and communicate their ideas. Related guidance on planning an environment for pretend play (DCSF 2008b; DCSFc) highlights the need to support children in developing differing interests through role play, and it provides general guidance on the importance of accessible resources and flexible spaces indoors. It also advises on the need for practitioners to provide flexible resources to support play and exploration, including materials for dens and shelters. However, the specific guidance on imaginative play focuses primarily on adults providing stimuli for pretend, for example through stories or further experiences; it lacks specificity as to the kinds of spaces, places and things that might best support children developing their existing interests through pretend. The revised guidance (DfE 2012) adds further ideas for stimuli but no further detail as to affordances of different kinds of environments.

**Literature Review**

This section reviews literature relating to the functions of pretend and the affordances of differing environments. Drawing on a range of disciplinary perspectives, it makes links between literature relating to the functions of pretend; children’s interests and preoccupations; early childhood curricula and pedagogies; and environmental design in ECEC settings. The review begins with a consideration of debates about pretend play.

**Pretend play**

Researchers identify pretend play as a persistent interest of young children historically and across cultures, although varying in frequency and in the extent to which it is valued culturally (Corsaro 2005; Smith 2010). Labelled variously as role play and imaginative play (DCSF 2008), pretend play has been recognised as an important component of ECEC curricula in England from the beginning of the 20th century (Steedman 1990) and remains an important feature of curricula internationally (OECD 2004). Nevertheless, the functions of pretend and its place in the curriculum remain a focus of debate (Smith 2010).

From a psycho-biological developmental perspective, pretend play, as a form of representation, has been recognised as significant from the mid-20th century onwards, with Piaget’s theorisation of studies of his own young children’s play (Kavanaugh and Engel 1998). Focusing principally on
developments in solitary play and the cognitive underpinnings of pretend (Kavanaugh and Engel 2010), Piaget saw pretend as primarily an assimilative activity, rather than an activity driving new learning (Smith 2010). In contrast, Vygotsky established a positive view of the role of pretend in learning, recognising it as a source of imagination and creativity, with continuing significance into adulthood (Smith 2010). Smith (2010) summarises further recent evidence of the functions of pretend in supporting young children’s increasingly complex narrative skills; their cognitive and language development; early literacy skills; and theory of mind development. Whitebread’s (2012) review concurs but adds additional evidence of the value of pretend in supporting young children’s social and emotional learning, including emotional self-regulation. However, Smith (2010), while acknowledging pretend play as educationally valuable, concludes that it may represent just one of a number of possible pathways to desired learning outcomes, with recognition contingent on values within a particular culture.

Researchers from other disciplines have examined pretend play in early childhood. Corsaro (2005), working within the new sociology of childhood, draws on ethnographic studies of ECEC settings in Italy and the US to claim a significant role for pretend in children’s peer cultures. He highlights the processes of young children’s exploration of shared concerns and interests from their social worlds, as they engage in the “reconstruction and interpretation of past events” (Corsaro, Molinari and Rosier 2002, 18). Corsaro (2005, p18), like Vygotsky, argues for the creativity of pretend play, and he explains this in his theory of ‘interpretive reproduction’. Post-structuralist frameworks (Rogers 2011), offer a further perspective on the functions of pretend in children’s social lives. For example, in an Australian study of 4 and 5 year’s olds’ playground experiences, Ailwood (2011, p27) argues that pretend offers children a powerful discourse, with “potential for excluding and resisting adult agendas”; this links to Corsaro’s views on the potency of pretend for young children’s peer cultures.

The section below moves on to consider a recent educational perspective on the affordances of pretend as a vehicle to link children’s rich, informal learning in families and communities to their learning in pre-schools and schools.

**Children’s interests and fund of knowledge**

Hedges et al (2010, p185), studying children’s interests in two early childhood settings in Aotearoa/New Zealand, argue the need for teachers to deepen their understanding of children’s interests as developed through ‘intent participation’ in everyday family and community experiences. Drawing on the theoretical framework of ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez et al 2005), they explain how children’s interests, both individual and shared, link to their informal knowledge developed in such contexts. Hedges et al (2010) argue that teachers often fail to acknowledge family and community experiences despite their rich potential for further knowledge-building through planned curriculum experiences. In focusing on such experiences, Hedges et al (2010) highlight children’s preoccupations with the interests, leisure activities, occupations and beliefs of parents, grandparents, family friends, siblings and cousins, including the activities of parenting and “household and domestic tasks” (p193). Additionally, they emphasise children’s interests in community-based social and cultural events, alongside popular culture.

Drawing out implications for a curriculum rooted in family and community interests, Hedges et al (2010) foreground the curriculum possibilities of authentic adult-world and project-based activities, critiquing more prevalent, play-based approaches. They do, however, note that authentic and project-based approaches may support some children’s interests better than others due to power differentials in how teachers respond preferentially to the interests of more “assertive, popular and
verbal…. children” (Hedges et al 2010, p?) or privilege interests matched to their own. While briefly acknowledging the knowledge-building possibilities of play, Hedges et al (2010) leave unexamined the concept of a “well-resourced, child-centred, play-based environment” (p186), including the ways in which play environments might differentially support a ‘funds of knowledge’ approach.

In contrast, Tobin et al’s (2009) cross-cultural study of pre-schools in China, Japan and the US recognises the rich curriculum potential of interests-based pretend play, supported by teacher scaffolding. Exploring continuity and change in China’s pre-schools, the authors describe how 4 year olds in a progressive, Shanghai pre-school take the lead in developing pretend play that creates a mini-society within a single session, incorporating home, shopping, beauty parlour, fast food restaurant and hospital. Tobin et al (2009) point to the congruence of this play with John Dewey’s notion of schools as emergent communities, reflecting the experiences of the wider society, a congruence noted by some Chinese teachers. Therefore, building on the two studies (Hedges et al 2010; Tobin et al 2009), there is a need to consider how environments for play might support inclusive knowledge-building in ways that acknowledge the potential diversity of children’s interests, including the interests of less dominant children. The next section considers relevant literature, focusing on the environmental dimension of curriculum and pedagogy.

**The Environmental Dimension of Curriculum and Pedagogy**

Discussing findings from a large scale, longitudinal study of ECEC practice in England, Siraj-Blatchford (2010) identifies key ECEC curriculum dimensions that include both social and physical dimensions of the environment. Her definition of curriculum includes “the material resources (toys, furniture, and props), the activities, the social interactions and the environments…” all shaped by adults (Siraj-Blatchford 2010, p150). The study also defines pedagogy as the teacher’s “full set of instructional techniques and strategies”, including the teacher’s “provision of ‘discovery’ learning environments” (Siraj-Blatchford 2010, p150). Similarly, Carr (1996, p43), discussing the principles underpinning Te Whariki, highlights both the physical and social dimensions of children’s engagement in “responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things.”

Despite this dual focus in definitions, recent UK literature attends to the physical environmental aspects of curriculum and pedagogy in a limited way only. Sylva (2010, p72), acknowledges that a key Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) research instrument, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms et al. 1998), “describes processes of the educational and care environment much more than the physical space and materials on offer.” This emphasis also shapes Siraj-Blatchford’s (2010) influential discussion of pedagogy with its primary focus on the adult role in sustained verbal, adult-child interaction, and more limited focus on children’s engagement with “places and things” (Carr 1996, p43). The emphasis of these influential discussions in England contrasts with other perspectives that foreground the significance of environmental design for ECEC pedagogy.

Reggio Emilia, for example, is an example that foregrounds the environmental dimension of pedagogy, highlighting the concept of the physical learning environment as “the third educator” alongside the classroom’s two teachers (Gandini 2012, p339). In Reggio Emilia, educators and architects have collaborated on a rationale for and design of learning environments to promote young children’s wellbeing and learning, privileging creativity, including pretend play, as key features of the curriculum. Gandini (2012) highlights flexibility as an essential attribute of effective environments, arguing that flexible environments enable “frequent modification by the children and the teachers in order to remain responsive to their needs to be protagonists in constructing their knowledge” (p339). In England, Broadhead and Burt (2012), in a study of the play of 3 to 5 year olds in a school early years unit, draws similar conclusions about the significance of flexibility in indoor and outdoor environments for children’s sustained engagement in play matched to their wide-
ranging interests. This study evidences play that is often complex, particularly for experienced players who know each other well.

This emphasis on the environmental dimension of pedagogy is also seen in the work of environmental and developmental psychologists (Maxwell 2007; Maxwell et al. 2008). Drawing on studies in this tradition, Maxwell (2007) has developed a rating scale to assess key features of ECEC environments that affect young children’s competence and learning. She argues that this scale supports a clearer focus on the physical environment than the widely used ECERS and ITERS scales. Maxwell’s (2007) observational and intervention study of 3 to 5 year olds on a preschool playground provides evidence of the significance of such features for ‘fantasy play’. Key dimensions of this scale are “control, privacy, complexity, exploration, restoration, personalization and legibility” (Maxwell 2007, p230). These claims draw on the Vygotskian concept of ‘scaffolding’ to explain how environmental attributes support early learning and children’s sense of competence.

Maxwell’s environmental dimensions of control, exploration, personalisation and privacy link closely to the concept of flexibility as discussed by Gandini (2012) and by Broadhead and Burt (2012). Maxwell (2007) highlights how simple opportunities for children to move materials and resources enable them to set their own levels of challenge. For example, children personalise their environment by moving child-sized furniture to new spaces, enhancing their sense of control (Maxwell 2007). In an intervention study, Maxwell et al (2008) introduced a range of movable resources, including blocks, tyres, tree stumps, piping and fabric, referred to as ‘loose parts,’ that led to significant increases in constructive and pretend play as children explored the possibilities of space and play materials. This further enhances the sense of control and competence. In addition, Maxwell’s (2007) scale highlights privacy as an environmental attribute that strengthens the opportunities for children to exercise control in relation to social experiences. Privacy is supported where children can find spaces to be alone or to play in small groups, as well as where they can create their own private spaces through construction with movable resources (Maxwell 2007). The observation and intervention study (Maxwell et al. 2008, p36) suggests that pretend play increases in outdoor environments that offer “enclosed spaces with visibility to other areas of the playground, nodes and connector spaces, and stage-type spaces.” Such spaces may be part of the design of fixed playground equipment or created by children themselves using loose parts.

As Maxwell (2007, p230) argues, “If the physical environment is an equal partner in children’s learning experiences, then it is important to understand more about the quality and characteristics of an environment that promotes competency and learning.” This paper will argue that planning particular kinds of physical learning environments contributes to effective pedagogy. It presents findings relating to the features of learning environments that promote both children’s sense of competence, as discussed by Maxwell (2007), and their development of funds of knowledge, as discussed by Hedges et al. (2010) but in the context of pretend play.

**Methodology**

The study used a purposive sample (Teddlie and Yu 2007) from two government regions, with a sampling frame that included children growing up in urban and rural settings; children from areas of social advantage and deprivation; and children from ethnically diverse communities. The proportion of settings from areas of social and economic disadvantage was relatively high, placing limits on generalisability. The sample comprised two children’s centres, two reception classes, two
maintained nursery classes, two private nurseries, one voluntary sector setting, one independent school, one out-of-school setting, four childminders and one Steiner kindergarten. As an ethical strategy, the sample included settings with OFSTED ratings of ‘satisfactory’ or above; however, the proportion of settings with higher ratings was relatively large, increasing limits on generalisability. The sample covered a range of children in each setting, taking account of gender, ethnicity, age and ability/disability. Under-representation of disabled children in the final sample again limits generalisability.

A starting point for this strand of the study was to try “to understand children’s standpoints in the context of their own lives….treating them as actors and knowers” (Smith 2011, p12) in relation to their experiences of play in ECEC settings. Based on an adaptation of the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001), researchers planned a set of methods to access these standpoints. The study also drew on participatory rural appraisal techniques (O'Kane, 2000). These include games and oral activities, designed for use in relatively poor countries that retain a primarily oral culture. Informed by these approaches, the study developed participatory activities for use with children relating to the three broad and relevant EYFS themes (DCSF 2008): a Unique Child; Learning and Development; and Learning Environments. Harcourt and Conroy (2011) argue that, to develop meaningful research with children, rather than undertaking research on children, time is required to develop a research relationship. This was a potential issue for the study, planned to a tight time-scale. A half-day initial visit to each setting was followed by a full day visit, representing a relatively short period for developing relationships. This affected the richness of qualitative data to variable degrees in different settings, depending on contextual factors such as the number of children in the group, the age of children and the organisation of settings.

The research activities, based on the EYFS themes above, were designed to take account of research (Tizard and Hughes 2002) on communicating with 3 and 4 year olds, and they incorporated a variety of strategies for promoting talk. To gather information about how early years settings were responding to the uniqueness and difference of children, a one to one activity was designed in which researchers created a digital picture book with children, used as a focus for talk about their ideal day in their settings. Researchers used a ‘tour’ of the setting (Clark and Moss, 2001), involving a teddy or puppet with younger children, to gather information about how children experienced the setting’s play environment. Two strategies were used to gather information on children’s experiences and views about learning and development in their settings. Researchers used records of children’s learning, where available, as a focus for conversation. Where a setting did not have accessible records of individual children and/or where children preferred to talk in the context of their play, participant observations were undertaken with individuals or small groups of children. The aim was to follow the child’s lead, engaging them in talk about activities at appropriate points.

Research activities were piloted in two contrasting settings: a children’s centre and a reception class. This increased researchers’ understanding of the ways in which children might respond to the planned activities and highlighted the need for a flexible approach. As a result, researchers negotiated final details of methods with each setting, taking account of the age and interests of children and any other relevant factors. Where parents gave consent, researchers invited children to participate in research activities. Children’s assent was checked as an ongoing process and, depending on children’s choices and the routines of settings, children participated in one or a number of activities. The paper uses fictitious names to protect anonymity.

Data was analysed to establish emerging themes, initially mapped against EYFS principles. The priority for analysis was to amplify children’s voices, and to identify common patterns in their various experiences.
Findings
All sixteen settings offered physical environments incorporating specific spaces, places and objects that children used as contexts and props for pretend play. In each setting, one or more children shared their interest and/or enjoyment of pretend with researchers. ‘Pretend’ was the word that children used most across settings to reference their imaginative and role play activities.

Pretend play: fantasy and ‘real world’ themes
Across the 16 settings, children talked about and/or engaged in pretend play focused on a wide range of themes, broadly classified as fantasy themes and ‘real world’ themes. Fantasy themes drew on narratives from children’s fiction and popular culture, including films and television programmes. ‘Real world’ themes drew on children’s everyday experiences within families and communities, experiences of the kind described by Hedges et al (2010) in the discussion of funds of knowledge. Categorisation is not entirely straightforward. For example, without knowing more about individual children’s experiences, it is difficult to categorise armed forces play, which has elements of both superhero and ‘real world’ play. Similarly, Holly’s play, which involved teaching a choir of plants to sing included a strong fantasy element, while appearing to draw on ‘real world’ experience. Additionally, themes are not always mutually exclusive, with several overlapping themes, for example, between the themes of homes and that of food.

Table 1 sets out the main fantasy themes of children’s pretend play with examples from specific settings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pretend play: fantasy themes</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superheroes</td>
<td>Mark (3y 11m) reported: <em>That’s me with my Buzz Lightyear.... I went round the garden, I found some baddies.</em></td>
<td>Private nursery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pirates</td>
<td>Jack played at pirates (4y 6m): <em>Treasure map! I’ve got a spade here!</em></td>
<td>Private nursery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princesses, fairies and ballerinas</td>
<td>Sophie (3y 10m) described the dressing up clothes: <em>Those are fairy shoes, they fit on me too... I want to be a fairy.</em></td>
<td>Voluntary preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monsters, dragons and dinosaurs</td>
<td>Gina (3y 6m) described some favourite scary games: <em>And David pretends to be a dinosaur.</em></td>
<td>Childminding setting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Fantasy themes explored during pretend play
Table 2 sets out the main ‘real world’ themes of children’s pretend play.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pretend play: ‘real world’ themes</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shops</td>
<td>Sarah (4y 0m) liked play in the shop: <em>I can be the shop keeper.</em></td>
<td>Children’s centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>Michael (4y 6m) explained: <em>It’s my bus that I made….I’m the driver.</em></td>
<td>Steiner kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian occupations / workplaces</td>
<td>Jim (5y 3m) enjoyed dressing up as a police-man: <em>Me being a police and I’m on my walkie-talkie.</em></td>
<td>Reception class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military occupations</td>
<td>Jack (4y 9m) talked about the owl puppet acting out a military scenario: <em>This owl likes to go in a tank. We’re just pretending this is the tank. Needs to hold a stick…..He likes to go on a horse. I can. He wants to be a soldier.</em></td>
<td>Steiner kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td></td>
<td>Childminding setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holidays &amp; leisure activities</td>
<td>Peter (3y 11m) explained <em>That’s where we go camping, we eat our dinners, there is a pretend fire</em></td>
<td>Private nursery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>Michael (4y 6m) kicked a ball to his childminder: <em>You’re Chelsea. I’m Hull.</em></td>
<td>Childminding setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows</td>
<td>Sarah (5y 2m) recalled ‘Show Time Arena’: <em>Nearly everybody wanted to go on….There was a big red stage.</em></td>
<td>Reception class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homes/family roles</td>
<td>Luke (4y 1m) identified a favourite activity, pointing to the home corner play area: <em>playing over there with dolls.</em></td>
<td>Private nursery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Kim (4y 6m) described her play with dough: <em>I like making pretend cakes, banana cakes and a bit of sugar on.</em></td>
<td>Private nursery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>Aziza (4y 4m) said to a child pretending to be a dog: <em>I’ll get your dish. I’ll feed you. This is your water.</em></td>
<td>Private nursery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jails</td>
<td>Lily (5y 6m) explained a photo: <em>That’s a really funny one where we make jails. That’s a jail for the kittens. People be the kittens.</em></td>
<td>Steiner kindergarten</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: ‘Real world’ themes explored during pretend play*
There were gender preferences in fantasy themes but not in ‘real world’ themes. Only boys engaged in or talked about pretend play focused on superheroes, armed forces and pirates; and only girls engaged in or talked about pretend play involving princesses, fairies or ballerinas. Both boys and girls engaged in or talked about ‘real world’ themes, with all themes, except for armed forces play, identified in two or more settings.

Although children talked about or engaged in pretend play themes in all settings, there were significant variations in the planned physical environments for pretend across settings. Variation in environments related to both the specific themes enjoyed by children and the range of themes explored in each setting. Where practitioners planned and set up realistic role-play areas or provided realistic resources, these were likely to engage the interest of at least some children. In some settings, a high proportion of children participating in the research talked enthusiastically about a specific realistic role-play area. For example, a private nursery’s outdoor role-play camping area was particularly popular, as was a reception class ‘ShowTime arena’ (see Table 2). However, in one setting a child was critical of a realistic home corner role play area for what she identified as poor maintenance and the limited nature of resources. Amy (4y 6m) explained:

*This is the dishwasher, you can put stuff in there and move it. This is the sink, cooker and the fridge…but we can’t really open it because the string’s gone, you have to pull it…but there is some food there, it would be even better if we had more food.*

**A continuum for pretend: realistic role-play areas to flexible spaces, places and things**

A high proportion of settings provided realistic role-play areas and resources that stimulated some children’s interest in the specific themes defined by provision, or, in the case above, critique of this provision. However, in some settings practitioners had planned more open-ended spaces and resources, which children could shape to their own interests, both fantasy and ‘real world’ interests. The 16 settings represent a continuum in terms of the relative emphasis placed on the provision of flexible spaces and objects for pretend in contrast to an emphasis on adult-defined places and props, linked to class topics. Two case studies for children in the 4 to 5 years age range represent settings near the ends of the continuum. Each case study presents the main elements of provision for pretend play, drawing on the perspectives of two children. The section below introduces first a reception class setting, with provision at the realistic end of the continuum. This is followed by a case-study of a Steiner kindergarten, at the opposite end.

**Pretend play in a reception class**

The reception class had realistic indoor role-play areas with defined themes that were regularly changed. The classroom also had realistic dressing up clothes. There opportunities for children to personalise spaces, places and things to support their own choices of pretend play themes was limited, particularly indoors. Table 3 sets out key features of the reception class physical environment; the perspective of two children on the affordances of the environment; and a list of pretend play themes identified by 10 reception children with ages between 4 years 7 months and 5 years 4 months.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children’s use of spaces, places &amp; things for pretend</th>
<th>Features of the physical environment</th>
<th>Child/children playing at pretend</th>
<th>Pretend themes identified by 4 girls and 6 boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Children use defined spaces and resources for pretend | **Indoors**: role play areas currently set up as a police-station and a Postman Pat post-office; role play area previously set up as Show Time Arena; dressing up clothes (role specific)  
**Outdoors**: sand tray with Bob the Builder hard hats, coats, boots & spades; push chairs | Sarah (5y 2m) explained a photo of children in the Show Time arena: *Nearly everybody wanted to go on. But only four allowed in. There was a big red stage. You had to dance or sing.*  
Richard (5y 0m) explained children’s play choices: *Sometimes the girls dress up as princesses and the boys dress up as firemen ... sometimes they pretend to put out fires.* | **Indoors**:  
- Civilian occupations: police; fire-fighters; priest  
- Shows: Show Time Arena  
- Princesses  
**Outdoors**:  
- Civilian occupations: builders |
| Children exercise control over social experience through opportunities for privacy | **Indoors**: the police station offered an enclosed and private space | | |
| Children explore the possibilities of open-ended spaces | **Indoors**: dressing up clothes (not role specific)  
**Outdoors**: | | |
| Children explore the possibilities of open-ended materials | **Indoors**:  
**Outdoors**: crates | | |
| Children personalise their environment by moving resources, including furniture and loose parts | **Indoors**:  
**Outdoors**: | | |

**Table 3**: The physical environment of a reception class and children’s pretend play themes
Pretend play in a Steiner kindergarten

The Steiner kindergarten has no role-play areas with a defined theme. It offered varied opportunities for children to personalise spaces, places and things, supporting a range of play themes. Table 4 sets out key features of the kindergarten’s physical environment; the perspective of two children on the affordances of the environment; and a list of pretend play themes identified by 11 kindergarten children with ages between 4 years 6 months and 5 years 6 months.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children’s use of spaces, places &amp; things for pretend</th>
<th>Features of the physical environment</th>
<th>Child/children playing at pretend</th>
<th>Pretend themes identified by 6 girls and 5 boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Children use defined spaces and resources for pretend | **Indoors**: 2 rocking horses; rag dolls; children’s small world resources from home | Elly (4y 10m) explained a photo: *When both me and Lily and we dressed up our horses when going on a ride* | **Indoors**:  
- Animals: horses |
| Children explore the possibilities of open-ended spaces | **Indoors**: small enclosed and covered space with table and chairs alongside a large empty, space  
**Outdoors**: empty playhouse, large undefined grassy and paved areas, and paths | Louise (4y 6m) entered an empty space in a central area of the classroom, developing it as a bedroom for a puppet and two toy foals. | **Indoors**:  
- Princesses  
- Shows: puppet show  
- Cooking & eating: tea party  
- Transport: car, train & bus rides  
- Animals: sheep dog, kittens  
- Jails  
- Shops  
- Homes and family roles: bedrooms & bathrooms, babies  
- Civilian occupations: decorator, bus driver; vet, shopkeeper, teacher  
**Outdoors**:  
- Schools  
- Military occupations: soldier |
| Children explore the possibilities of open-ended materials | **Indoors**: large blocks, planks, ladder, boxes, clotheshorses, ropes & fabrics; dressing up clothes (not role specific); range of small open-ended resources in baskets on shelves around room e.g. shells, small blocks, cones, marbles.  
**Outdoors**: small apparatus e.g hoops, balls, ropes. | Louise (4y 6m) used a variety of large and small resources to create features of the bedroom e.g. flowers as play materials; shells as food. | |
| Children personalise their environment by moving resources, including furniture and loose parts | **Indoors**: children allowed to move large & small resources to central area; not allowed to take resources outdoors  
**Outdoors**: children allowed to move resources around | Louise moved a variety of large resources (e.g. small tables, chairs, blocks) and small resources (e.g. vase of flowers, box, goblets, shells, fabric, foals) into the empty space to create a bedroom. | |
| Children exercise control over social experience through | **Indoors**: covered indoor space; children use large resources to | Louise played alone, creating a partial boundary to her space | |
opportunities for
privacy
create private spaces
Outdoors: playhouse
with a large block and
small chair.

Table 4: The physical environment of a Steiner kindergarten and children’s pretend play themes

Discussion
The reception class and Steiner kindergarten environments both prioritised the provision of spaces and resources for pretend play; and children in both settings talked in an animated way about pretend during tours of the setting and in explaining images of play. Access to children’s perspectives was further enhanced though participant observation in the Steiner kindergarten. However, despite the shared curriculum prioritisation of pretend and the shared enthusiasm of children, there were important differences of pedagogy and in the affordances of play environments at these opposite ends of the continuum.

In terms of the prevalent distinction between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities (Siraj-Blatchford 2010) the realistic role play areas in the reception class appeared to offer good opportunities for child-initiated pretend. However, adult decisions about children’s interests appeared to constrain opportunities for children to exert control and shape the provision to any interests beyond those defined by adults. While some children clearly enjoyed pretend play, their pretend play interests appeared limited to two ‘real world’ themes, workplaces/work roles and shows, and to one fantasy theme, princesses. In contrast, the eleven children in the Steiner kindergarten shared interests in ten ‘real world’ themes and one fantasy theme. The wide range of sub-themes explored by Steiner children is again suggestive of the affordances of this environment for children’s control, exploration and personalisation of the environment, identified by Maxwell (2007), alongside privacy, as supportive of competence and learning.

In trying to understand the contrasting affordances of the two environments, it is useful to consider the ‘real world’ themes that children explored in the light of John Dewey’s notion of schools as emergent communities, reflecting the experiences of the wider society (in Tobin et al 2009). The Steiner environment seemed to offer opportunities for children to represent a wider range of such community experiences, similar to the range of representational play observed in the modern Shanghai kindergarten of Tobin et al’s (2009) study. It is also useful to consider ‘real world’ themes in the light of claims for the importance of children’s funds of knowledge, as developed within families and communities (Hedges et al. 2010). Children explored a similar range of work-place occupations across the two settings. However, Steiner children explored a wider range of family interests and leisure activities, as well as aspects of parenting, including household and domestic tasks. It seems that the affordances of the Steiner play environment for children’s representation of their interests in the social and cultural experiences of their parents, grandparents, family friends, siblings and cousins was greater than that of the reception class environment.

Hedges et al. (2010) discussing the potential of a curriculum rooted in family and community interests, notes the danger of teachers privileging interests that match to their own and the interests of more dominant children when developing authentic adult-world and project-based activities. However, children in the Steiner setting were able to take the lead in shaping the environment to both support exploration of their individual and shared interests and to make these interests visible to practitioners. This suggests there may be advantages for a curriculum drawing on children’s funds
of knowledge that opportunities for pretend play shaped by children alongside adult-world and project-based activities led by adults, as discussed by Hedges et al (2010).

Conclusion

Carr (2012, p134) discusses the need for early years settings to offer children a way of balancing experiences, including the experience of “inside and outside the early childhood centre or classroom.” She draws on Wenger’s (1998, p275) social theory of learning which presents the argument that “…Learning communities cannot be isolated. They must use the world around them as a learning resource and be a learning resource for the world.” In this study of pretend play, many children communicated their enjoyment of realistic role play provision with features that matched to intense interests drawn from experiences in families and communities, for example realistic home-corners, shops, cafes and a police station. However, children evidenced an equally strong sense of engagement in pretend and explored a wider range of themes linked to individual interests and related funds of knowledge (Hedges et al 2011) in settings that settings offered more flexible and loosely defined spaces, places and things for play.

Rogers (2010) highlights the dimensions of control required for children to develop role play in a purposeful and sustained way. She suggests that, if free play is to become an actuality in early years settings and not just a myth, children need opportunities to make choices in terms of what they play with; where they play; who they play with; what they play; as well as when and for how long they play. This study suggests a need for increased specificity about the kind of environments that best support children in taking control of what they play. It also suggests a need for some rebalancing of the focus on early years pedagogy, to give greater consideration to the adult role in developing environments for pretend play.
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