

Reflections on the zero to low tolerance towards pretend gun play in early childhood settings

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Pretend gun play is one of the most popular play types children choose in early childhood settings, while it is often not recognised as an opportunity to initiate a constructive curriculum experience. In the process of developing ethical and effective pedagogical responses regarding pretend gun play, a shared attitude among parents and educators is the foundation of open communication, consistent guidance and innovative practices. This article will review studies of the last seven years that reflected on the zero to low tolerance towards pretend gun play in early childhood settings, so as to inform future empirical studies on the recommended pedagogical practices to guide children's pretend gun play.

Introduction

Pretend gun play is a type of sociodramatic play where the idea of using a pretend gun is included. The gun could be toys used as guns or pretend gestures like a thumb and a finger (Bauman, 2015). It has been a common but controversial type of play in early childhood education (ECE) settings since the image of a gun appeared in the ecological systems where children grow up (Watson & Peng, 1992; Bauman, 2015). Television, movies, commercial toys as well as real-life figures (for example, military servicemen and police officers) relate the image of a gun with power, adventure, excitement and heroes, influencing children's desire to involve guns into their play (Hart & Tannock, 2013).

In spite of the widespread interest among children, a considerable proportion of parents and early childhood educators have only zero to low tolerance towards it (Hart & Tannock, 2013; Delaney, 2017). There are many reasons for this attitude, like the connection between guns and violence and the way that pretend gun play often develops into chaotic, destructive classroom behaviours (Rosen, 2015). Although educational guidance policies and laws in many areas like New Zealand (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1998), United Kingdom (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2007, as cited in Rosen, 2015) and Florida, United States (Miller, 2014) called for more tolerance and understanding of such play behaviour, discouraging or banning pretend gun play is still a common practice in early childhood settings, either indicated in programme policies or as an unspoken shared practice (Bauman, 2015; Delaney, 2017). There are also educators who have ambivalent responses to such play, as they may feel uncomfortable either allowing or banning it, which negatively impact on the building of consistent child-teacher relationships and children's learning outcomes (Delaney, 2017).

In response to this situation, a group of academic articles that reflected on this zero to low tolerance were published, with the aim of informing appropriate responses towards children's pretend gun play to support children's development and the achievement of social justice (Bauman, 2015). This literature review will present these studies from the perspectives of the non-violence commitment, children's learning and development, and power balances in the classroom.

Commitment to anti-aggression: Challenges on the cueing effect theory

In the pursuit for proper guidance, both sides of the controversy share the vision of nurturing non-violent, peace-loving future citizens (Pancheri-Ambrose & Tritschler-Scali, 2013). Rosen (2015) and Delaney (2017) found in interviews with educators that the potential stimulation of aggressive behaviours is a major concern when making curriculum decisions

about pretend gun play. Reflections on the zero to low tolerance, therefore, seek to verify the relationship between pretend gun play and non-play aggressive behaviours (Winburn, Dugger & Main, 2017).

Studies published in the 1990s and 2000s pointing to the potential increase of aggressive behaviours stimulated by weapon play (for example, Watson & Peng, 1992; Dunn & Hughes, 2001) is often referred to as cueing effect theory by current authors (Winburn, Dugger & Main, 2017). The influence of this theory is enlarged because of its resonance with the weapon effect noticed in adults, referring to the causal relationship between just seeing a weapon and increased aggressive thoughts or behaviours (Bushman, Jamieson, Weitz & Romer, 2013). This theory also agrees with many adults' intuitional association between young children's gun play behaviours and stereotyped violent behaviours seen on TV (MoE, 1998). However, discourses and evidence that challenge this theory are emerging from multiple perspectives (Hart & Tannock, 2013; Bauman, 2015; Ryan, Lane & Powers, 2017).

Methodological limitations to this group of studies are criticised by some recent authors, the most significant among which is the simplification or neglecting of the sociocultural contexts when analysing children's behaviours through quantitative methodologies (Rosen, 2015). LaBoskey (2015) pointed out that gun play in ECE settings is behavioural and environmental, and emphasised the value of teachers' detailed, qualitative self-study into interactions among children and teachers, so that the influences of gun play could be clarified in its specific sociocultural contexts. Research in the field of play therapy raised a competing model against cue effect theory, figuratively known as cathartic theory because it hypothesises that pretend gun play could help children release aggressive feelings and thus reduce the possibilities of non-play aggressive behaviours (Laue, 2015). Nowadays most play therapy researchers and practitioners have an open attitude towards the intentional inclusion of toy guns as a vehicle for children's aggressive feelings (Ryan, Lane & Powers, 2017). Ray (2011) cautioned that if gun play and other aggressively themed play were banned, children might assume that their aggressive feelings were not allowed in the setting, potentially leading to reduced self-esteem, increased frustration and non-play aggression. Landreth (2012, as cited in Winburn, Dugger & Main, 2017, p. 140) called for the provision of "acting-out-aggressive-release" play opportunities for young children to release their aggressive tension and move on to more positive, self-enhancing feelings (Winburn, Dugger & Main, 2017).

The former lack of inspection into potential mediation variables like adults' responses when analysing play-and-aggression correlation is also drawing researchers' attention, and several qualitative, interpretive studies were conducted on educators' responses and their potential consequences (Logue & Detour, 2011; Delaney, 2017). Logue and Detour (2011) recognised in the recording of children's play and educators' field notes that both children and educators were able to distinguish pretending from real aggression if attentive verbal and physical interactions were present. Their study also indicated that when teachers respond to children's play intentions, the aggressively themed play tends to develop into intellectually constructive experiences. By contrast, Delaney (2017) reported in a case study that when pretend violence was forbidden by negative instructions, real aggression could happen in the classroom even more harshly. These studies provide a new perspective for future research that emphasises the intermediate role of adults' responses, instead of being trapped in the simplified correlation between play and non-play aggression. A current research gap in this issue is about current parent attitudes towards pretend gun play and how they influence children's behaviours (Rosen, 2015).

Focusing back on children's learning: Pedagogical opportunities and challenges

The last few years witnessed critical examinations on educators' intervention in children's choices of play, among which gun play is a typical controversial point (Delaney, 2017). A review of studies on children's play (Cheng & Johnson, 2010) suggested that behavioural and academic expectations on children's play could lead to less supportive responses of educators towards some types of play, even if they also "[emerge] naturally from children's interests" (p. 250).

Specifically targeted at pretend gun play, Hart and Tannock (2013) criticised how forces out of the profession pressured educators to disregard pedagogical meanings of this play choice. Bauman (2015) used the two studies above to back up her appeal for more recognition of and responses to children and the play itself, instead of external factors. Delaney (2017) also called for more pedagogical inquiries after finding out that a lack of pedagogical discussions to inform educators' practices added to their discomfort and uncertainty when confronting such situations and making curriculum decisions.

Currently, three domains of pedagogical opportunities attached to pretend gun play are recognised by its advocates: its influence on power balances in the classroom (Rosen, 2017), which will be unfolded in the next section; its contribution to children's socialising and learning dispositions, such as the sense of fairness, confidence, playfulness, liking for adventures (MoE, 1998; Bauman, 2015; MoE, 2017); and its role in children's development of working theories on guns, weapons and violence (Hart & Tannock, 2013; Logue & Detour, 2011). While practitioners of zero to low tolerance could present alternative ways to nurture the dispositions related with pretend gun play (MoE, 1998; Delaney, 2017), studies in such zero to low tolerance settings indicated a silence on whether and how children should construct working theories on issues like guns and violence when they are absent from children's play (Hart & Tannock, 2013; Delaney, 2017). United States jurist Richard Posner's viewpoint that raising children in an intellectual bubble away from descriptions of violence would leave them unequipped to cope with the world (as cited in Thierer, 2003) resonates with advocates of pretend gun play in ECE settings (Hart & Tannock, 2013; Delaney, 2017). They argue that involving guns in their play is the most accessible way for children to seek sense-making of such a complex issue in our society (Bauman, 2015; LaBoskey, 2015). Pretend play, which frames a context for engaging with matters from the real world (Danby, Davidson, Theobald, Houen & Thorpe, 2017), is considered able to provide an opportunity for children to play out their concerns and to construct solutions (Logue & Detour, 2011). Bauman's (2015) interviews with pre-schoolers indicated an increased collective understanding of violence control, social justice values and problem-solving strategies when pretend gun play was actively facilitated and guided by the teacher, demonstrating the pedagogical opportunities contained in pretend gun play through a closer scope.

At the same time, some authors presented pedagogical challenges attached to pretend gun play. Rosen (2015) found in an ECE setting, which switched from a low-tolerance practice to an official policy of permitting weapon play, that educators felt tension about pretend gun play partially because they found it difficult to be "built on in order to meet ... learning goals" (p. 7). Educators also reported that children were stuck in such play, repeating simple gun-related play scripts without moving on to more constructive stages. Bauman (2015) noticed in her teaching practices that children sometimes got engaged into intense pretend gunplay battles that included little communication but rough movements across the playroom. This unverballed, abrasive form of play is different from what educators usually expect about sociodramatic play (Danby et al., 2017) and the desired learning outcomes attached to it (MoE, 2017). These challenges exert a negative influence on their attitudes towards gun play (Rosen, 2015). Coping strategies Bauman (2015) employed included ongoing dialogues on fairness and rules and adult control on materials that stimulated rough gun play like large lego blocks. Logue and Detour (2011) presented an innovative curriculum practice to respond to 'bad guy' play, where the teachers actively engaged in the play script as the 'bad guy', so that the teachers became highly present in the "rhyme and structure" (p. 13) of the play, gained more opportunities to recognise children's intentions and concerns, and thus were able to scaffold children's communication, teamwork and construction of working theories on 'bad guy' issues in more responsive ways. However, more pedagogical research to inform educators' strategies of responding to pretend gun play is yet to be offered (Hart & Tannock, 2013).

Post-constructivist reflections: Power balances in the classroom

In addition to constructivist discussions on children's construction and co-construction of knowledge, theories and abilities (Bauman, 2015), post-constructivist concepts like children's agency, autonomy and power relationships with

others are also emerging in current inquiries (Millei, 2012; Rosen, 2017). Kuykendall (1995) presented a scenario where a small group of children's gun play caused chaos around the classroom and interrupted other children's work, and the author further unfolded her argument in a later article, that educators should create a learning environment free of such unfairness "by using our power to say that such play will not occur here in the classroom" (Kuykendall, 1996, p. 2). After more than 20 years, this way of thinking and practice is found to be still current with some educators, while some other researchers and practitioners are questioning whether this use of power could achieve its intention (Moore, 2015), and even more importantly, whether this use is fair by itself (Rosen, 2017).

Stephenson's (2011) research on how children created their own curriculum experiences indicated that children may seek their collective interest. As Corsaro (2011, as cited in Moore, 2015) explained, children's underlife exists alongside and in reaction to official rules that contradict their choice of play. Delaney (2017) demonstrated in her case study that banning violently themed play did not eliminate this interest but drove children to hide their play from educators, and their underlying intentions could result in a higher risk of unsupervised aggression. Rosen (2015) interpreted this use of power through examinations on the "taken-for-granted power relations" (p. 235) between adults and children. She pointed out that adults situated themselves as those who take charge of children's play by claiming this power, and impinged on children's autonomy to "negotiate dissonance, discomfort and contradiction in play" (p. 248). Delaney (2017) criticised that behind this use of power is the educators' insecurity of not being able to predict the development of the play and meanings children attach to the pretending. Millei (2012) advocates a democratic environment where classroom discipline is built on mutual understanding instead of adults' power superiority over children. Another recent study of Rosen (2017) discussed this issue through the lens of intergenerational politics, and suggested that imaginary play could initiate and enrich adult-child power negotiation for better achievement of social justice.

Gender power balance is also a controversial issue concerning pretend gun play. On the one hand, boys' needs to go through the violently themed play stage and the potential risks of marginalising boys when banning such play drives a "turn to violently-themed play as a venue for supporting boys' development" (Rosen, 2015, p. 241). On the other hand, when pretend gun play is emphasised as boys' gendered play, pressure is also very likely to be shifted to some girls for them to obey the stereotype and give up their interest (Lynch, 2015). More research is yet to be conducted to inform ECE practices where children of different genders are equally recognised and supported according to their unique interest and strengths (Stephenson, 2011).

Conclusion

The years 2011 - 2017 have witnessed critical examinations on the zero to low tolerance towards pretend gun play from multiple perspectives, while further research is yet to be conducted concerning the coordination of different stakeholders' voices, the development of strategies to guide and build on children's play, and the complex power relationships among diverse members of the learning community (Hart & Tannock, 2013; Bauman, 2015; Rosen, 2015; Delaney, 2017).

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