A case study of how children play in one school in Ghana

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Abstract

The aim of this case study was to investigate how children in one school in Ghana interacted with their peers and used playground space within their play. The data was collected through video recorded observations in a range of contexts. Two videos were analysed for each research question against associated literature. This study identified that although play is a universal characteristic, it varies due to influences such as cultural norms and so it should be observed from an unrestricted viewpoint. Ghana is a community culture in which touch is part of normative social values; this was evident throughout. Children were tactile in using space effectively and played collaboratively in close proximity to each other.

It is important to consider pertinent literature on this topic; this will be presented first. Within this, the definition of play will be explored followed by Piaget's influence and the importance of play on children’s development. Additionally, play in non-Western cultures will be discussed and so will literature relating to peer to peer interaction and space. Next, the use of a case study, the sampling strategy, data collection methods and data analysis will be explored and justified. Subsequently, the key findings for the research project will be established and analysed followed by a conclusion which summarises the project outcomes.

Literature Discussion

Defining play

It ought to be acknowledged that play is interpreted from different perspectives, and one representation which appears to reflect such a consensus of the literature is that:

*Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.*

(Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005)

Piaget’s influence

Smith (2010) inferred that Piaget was one of the first to recognise the sequence of development in children’s play. The pioneer researched play extensively and established that it was an essential component of children’s development, particularly for social and cognitive aspects. However, it could be implied that Piaget viewed his research from a Western perspective and failed to acknowledge cultural factors (Dasen, 1994; Edwards et al., 2000). Universal assumptions that play is the same worldwide have been contested (Blaise 2005; Hedegaard and Fleer 2008; Edwards and Nuttall 2009) and so it is imperative that cultural influences are considered throughout this review.

The importance and nature of play

A significant amount of literature has established the importance of play on children’s holistic development (Tassoni, 2000; Scarlett et al. 2005; Elkind, 2008; Hattie, 2009; Beckley, 2012; Goldstein, 2012; Palaologou, 2013; Moyles, 2015). However, this is not a recent finding, for centuries there has been a recognition on the value of play and it still is increasingly researched and identified in legislation (Brock et al. 2009; Whitebread, 2012). The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1990) regard this resource as an essential right to all children and the Early Years Foundation Stage (2012) (EYFS) underpins
a play based pedagogy for children under five years in England. Furthermore, different pedagogical approaches which can be seen in many countries incorporate play into their ethos including: Steiner, Te Whariki, Reggio Emelia, Montessori, Waldoff and the Swedish approach.

The presence of play has been shown to have considerable developmental benefits (Fisher, 1992), particularly aiding brain development (Ginsburg, 2007; Moyles, 2015). It could be debated that this is enabled when children learn about the world around them by playing out thoughts and experiences (DfCSF, 2009; Else, 2009; Rubin et al. 2009; Tassoni, 2000). This strengthens the argument of Piaget (1962) who founded the idea of schemas where children use existing knowledge to comprehend new learning experiences thus, supporting cognitive growth. Play also allows children to be creative and use their imagination (Ginsburg, 2007), consequently enhancing these areas of development (Fromberg and Gullo, 1992; Frost, 1992). These attributes are emphasised as a fundamental factor for achievement (Duffy, 2006; Robinson, 2006).

Play deprivation is thought to limit development (Brown and Webb, 2005; Hughes, 2003; Valentino et al. 2011). Yet, the observations had confounding factors that might challenge the findings due to the children being exposed to unreliable provision such as, the infants also had been exposed to maltreatment. However, Whitebread (2012) asserted that studies have revealed that there is a correlation between the absence of play and the delay in cognitive and emotional development. Additionally, Goldstein (2012) noted that children who do not play, have a risk of delayed development, behaviour and self-control. Nevertheless, the concept may be more convincing when analysing children who have been exposed to play after deprivation. Taneja et al. (2002) found that children in an orphanage who were introduced to structured play showed encouraging advances in their cognitive and social development. Although it could be suggested this study also encounters common influences which could compromise the inference, e.g. children lacking adult attachment, the argument remains that play has an association with children’s wellbeing.

Play in non-Western cultures

It is important to reflect on possible limitations that have arisen in this literature discussion so far, as a lot of play research tends to draw upon Western theories (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Rogoff, 2003). It is therefore perhaps beneficial to consider viewpoints on non-Western play.

It could be postulated that even in research focusing on cultures, the Western viewpoint affects the findings with some degree of bias. For example, Smilansky (1968) asserted that low income and non-Western children do not play as creatively as their Western counterparts. Conversely, this claim fails to acknowledge several factors, particularly that play is, arguably, interpretation based. Thus, there is a possibility that children from other cultures have play types that are not appreciated in Western theory. Additionally, Gönçü and Gaskins (2007) stated that the research did not consider the values of the culture and the possible influence of economic and social conditions. Studies have highlighted the differences in play experiences (Broadhead et al. 2010). For example, Gönçü and Gaskins (2007) recognised that play is a universal characteristic but has variations based on social, economic and cultural contexts.

Smith (2010) acknowledged that children’s play is influenced by their culture. The author gave examples of children herding cattle and pounding rice during play experiences. It could be suggested that these examples in play have arisen after the child had observed adults doing such tasks. Lancy (1996) also found this and stated that children recreate observations in their play and from this, learn how to complete daily tasks and routines. This could perhaps support Piaget’s (1962) theory of schemas, where infants use existing ideas to assimilate new learning. Smith (2010) strengthened this, suggesting that many children in...
rural societies who have less time to play, often combine work and play. The author also noted that same gender play often occurs. When considering the previous point about children recreating adult tasks, it could be inferred that the gender segregation in play occurs because adults have gender specific tasks. This point is consolidated by Leacock (1978) who observed North African children and found that children imitate tasks and use objects in relation to adults of the same gender, for example girls making food and baskets.

**Peer to peer interaction**

Numerous sources have confirmed the positive effects of peer interactions on social development (Fisher, 1992; Coolahan, 2000; Mize, 2005; Broadhead, 2006; Rubin et al. 2009; Beckley, 2012). Additionally, Piaget classified his thoughts on the benefits of peer interaction in five points, including that both children have a greater insight into a concept after a shared discussion (Gray and Mcblain, 2012). Moreover, further research has consolidated this, noting that children can gain cognitive growth from discussions with peers (Howe, 2009; Rubin et al. 2009). Contrastingly, negative peer relations have been associated with diminished school outcomes, emotional and social development (Denham & Holt, 1993; De Rosier et al. 1994).

Keenan and Evans (2009) also emphasised that peer interactions are shaped by culture asserting that children in Western countries, where individualism is encouraged, show that peers interact differently than in those countries that are seen as collectivist societies where it is more important to consider the needs of a group rather the individual. For example, Ghana follows this value (LeFebvre and Franke, 2013). This could be seen in the types of games that children are involved in for example, collectivist communities may group and show high levels of cooperation in play (Keenan and Evans, 2009).

Piaget (1962) maintained the importance of peer interaction on development but also noted limitations for children in the egocentric stage (two to seven years) as they cannot consider alternative viewpoints. However, Coolahan, (2000) suggested that peer dialogue allows children to move away from egocentric thoughts because children share ideas and opinions from others points of view. Furthermore, Guralnick (1993) and Topping and Ehly (1998) confirmed that interaction allows children to learn conflict resolution and cooperative learning skills.

When children play and engage in dialogue regularly, they develop their own peer culture. This is defined by Corsaro (2005) as the routines and values peers generate and share with each other during interaction. For instance, peers may negotiate with each other to build on their peer status. Corsaro (2005) also stated that children interpret the surrounding culture for example the norms of adults and other children, and recreate and adapted it to make it logical for their activities; a concept called interpretive reproduction.

Peer interaction is not limited to verbal dialogue (Else, 2009), in fact eighty-five percent of communication is through non-verbal communication (NVC) (Bruce, 2015). Agbagla (2012) affirmed that NVC includes gestures, facial expression, touch and eye contact. However, Hasttle and Samter (1997) recognised that NVC differs from culture to culture, for example, that one type of communication may be used more than others.

Argyle (1996) discussed the equilibrium theory, noting that within any interaction there are forces of approach and avoidance. The author listed relationship cues which can signal friendliness or dominance to the other child. For example, a child showing friendless with proximity will be closer to their peer, in contrast to showing dominance, where they will take up more space, and adopt a raise in body position. The equilibrium is balanced when all parties feel comfortable within the interaction. When unbalanced, a participant may show a different cue to try and rebalance it for instance, within the previous example, backing away
from the other person or demonstrating less gaze (Doherty-Sneddon, 2003). These will be discussed in further detail within each NVC type for example, touch and eye contact.

Agbagla (2012) emphasised that touch is the simplest but most important form of communication for children. Referring again to Argyle’s theory (1996), a child might be showing signs of appropriate self-touching in a friendly situation. On the other hand, a child seeking dominance might show increased levels of touching to the other person. However, as previously emphasised, NVC is culturally determined and this is particularly so with touch. Doherty-Sneddon (2003) acknowledged that there are non-contact and contact cultures. Contact cultures are more accepting of increased touch, gaze and closer proximity than non-contact cultures. For instance, it has been noticed that non-contact cultures have previously identified that contact cultures are ‘over-close’ (Argyle, 1996). This implies that it is important to have an awareness of NVC variations so it is not misinterpreted. According to Carta (2009), communities within Africa are seen as predominantly contact cultures.

Doherty-Sneddon (2003) has inferred that eye contact establishes joint attention on a task. The author also discussed the term ‘mutual gaze’ which is where children simultaneously look at each other; this is perceived as a sign of friendship. Argyle (1996) previously noted this and also identified that more gaze establishes a hierarchy.

How space is used in play

Space is an important factor in children’s play (Beckley, 2012). However, pertinent literature appears limited in this area and so it is perhaps helpful to examine outdoor learning and playgrounds.

Forest school is a phenomenon that involves children becoming hands on with the natural environment and encourages learning outdoors (Knight, 2013). This is consolidated by Austin et al. (2015) who established that outdoor learning, thus forest school has benefits to all areas of development. Harriman (2006) also recognised that it can link with all areas of the curriculum. Knight (2013) affirms the positive impact on children’s self-esteem and confidence for those who explore the outdoor environment. This is consolidated by Gill (2007) who also noted that there is scope for risk taking in exploration, a key component for resilience. This could be because an outdoor environment has a different mental and emotional feel to the indoor one (White, 2011). The author also highlights that outdoor play provides scope for children to interchange between large to small scale play, while it allows children to play in different sized groups. Delidou (2015) perceived that children are more physically active when they have a larger play space. In spite of this, children’s activity levels appear to be reduced when teachers are supervising children’s play (Parrish et al. 2009).

Another benefit is that natural spaces provide unrestrictive opportunities for play (Nutbrown, 1999; Broadhead et al., 2010; White, 2011) which enables individuals to follow their own interests, a prominent feature of the EYFS (2012). However, when considering this statement in regards to the playground, literature suggests traditional playgrounds are more restrictive; social and fantasy play is limited and physical play appears frequent (Barbour, 1999; Sutterby and Frost, 2006). However, the validity of this may be questioned, since these studies were comparing how effective play equipment is on types of play, without considering playgrounds that may have no equipment.

The findings from the literature review reveal key themes that will be analysed, which are:

- How do children interact with their peers during play?
- How is playground space used in children’s play?
Methodology

This chapter discusses and justifies the methods used for the research relating to the case study.

Context

The research was conducted in a small school, situated in a rural village in the Volta region of Ghana. The school of one hundred and twenty pupils had children whose ages ranged from two years to fifteen years old; however, for the benefit of this research, the study was confined to children who were four to six years old. Ethical consent was sought for the study by the Head teacher of the school.

Case study

A case study, reflected in this study, is defined as a research method that intends to examine one case in detail (Burton and Bartlett, 2005; Thomas, 2016). Moreover, according to Wilson (2009), this approach gives the researcher an insight into a topic, giving familiarity, as the investigator experiences the case; other research methods are unable to do this. Yin (1993) established different approaches to case studies; this research was collected through an exploratory approach where the research questions emerged after the data was collected rather than prior to data collection. Limitations in case studies can include validity, because the researcher may be subjective (Wilson, 2009). This may be because the researcher may use previous experiences with children to inform a view e.g. observing play in Britain. An awareness of this during the study led to a well-ranging sample of multiple observations to minimise subjectivity because preconceived ideas were challenged by a spectrum of behaviours. Additionally, this acknowledgment meant I consciously tried to observe from an inexperienced perspective, with an awareness that play might be similar or different in Ghana.

Sampling strategy

When collecting a sample, it is important to consider the individuals and variables to ensure the research represents a realistic view of the population within the context (Elton-Chalcraft et al. 2008). Random sampling can increase validity where the population is chosen through an unplanned approach (Elton-Chalcraft et al. 2008). The sample taken adhered to this because video observations were made at various intervals at random, which ensured there were no preconceived agendas that may have influenced the children’s play or led to unintentional bias. This was most appropriate as it meant that a broad range of footage was recorded, thus it meant that a range of data was collected. However, for data analysis a stratified sample was chosen to ensure that the videos best represented the whole population.

Thirty videos were recorded for the research with four taken as a sample for analysis. Some of the videos did not follow the context or the population did not correspond within the age bracket of four to six years, which was the focus age group. The videos were chosen in a way to ensure that there was a variety of scenarios for instance, paired interaction, different size groups and different genders playing. A small number of videos were chosen to ensure an in-depth, accurate analysis rather than a broad insight of many videos.

Data collection

The data was collected through video recorded observations of the children. Wilson (2009) advocated that taking video footage is an advantageous way of collecting observation samples. It could be implied that this is because the footage can be repeatedly analysed
from the original. Additionally, observations are accessible because patterns between verbal and non-verbal behaviours may arise and could be identified after analysis which other research methods may not disclose (Burton and Bartlett 2005; Burton et al. 2008; Wilson, 2009). Another benefit to this approach was time efficiency. Descombe (2007) advocated that plenty of data can be collected in a short time span, thus, giving opportunity for the research to accumulate further data, consequently, increasing reliability. Equally, it could be pointed out that the time taken for extensive analysis of the data is lengthy.

Burton and Bartlett (2005) stated the researcher may find it difficult to observe and record at the same time, consequently, compromising the data validity. However, the use of video observations addressed this because it meant the data was observed at a later point. Despite this, Wilson (2009) inferred that the use of a camera could result in observations from only the perspective of the lens. Nonetheless, it could be assumed that having numerous videos has helped to accommodate this, and the use of a camera ensured that I experienced a better input for the study because the focus was not solely on observing at the time. Elton-Chalcraft (2008) suggested that participants may act differently if they know they are being observed. Although this may be so, data was collected throughout a three-week period and in an environment where electronic devices, for example phones and cameras, were often used by volunteers. As a result, pupils were familiar with such equipment, and thus over the period of time pupils became less conscious, and overlooked the camera, although aware of its presence.

It may be questioned why other data methods were not used for the study despite numerous sources recommending a triangulation of three methods to ensure reliability (Scott and Morrison, 2007). Regardless of this, other methods were less appropriate and may have hindered validity and reliability. For example, questionnaires and interviews firstly did not suit the question, and would have constrained communication because the population and myself had a reduced understanding of each other’s first language. Additionally, the time frame to undertake the research was a consideration. Using other methods would have been more time consuming for a strong analysis. Having the opportunity to experience the school environment without having questions in mind, meant that the research occurred naturally and I picked up on trends that interested me as an early year’s specialist. Taking video observations and analysing the data at a later point meant it was not as time consuming for the duration of my trip and meant I could gain an insight of the school whilst captivated by the experience. Thus, it could be assumed that play is best understood through observations, since gaining opinions of others may not give the best insight, thus experiencing it with the children could provide a more in depth perspective.

Although a triangulation approach was not employed for this research, analysing the videos with different foci in mind, for example, the use of space and interaction, gave a broader overview of this case study.

Data analysis

Wilson (2009) maintained that a balanced approach to examining data is desirable, since, on the one hand, an over-intense focus may result in the researcher identifying only what they want to see, while, on the other hand, insufficient focus could result in the researcher recording everything at the cost of losing direction of the study.

The data was explored through structured observations of the footage. Descombe (2007) and Hopkins (2008) stated that using recording methods such as scales are beneficial because the data is factual where other types of observation may appear more judgmental. Despite this, with appropriate research being limited, the literature discussion was used to examine the footage. Although it could be argued that this meant the analysis might have been subjective, the fact I drew on research and literature decreased this risk.
However, it was considered to use structure scales. There are various ways that peer dialogue can be analysed including Broadhead (2006) who founded the concept of the social play continuum, and the Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale (PIPPS), both of which focus on observations of peer to peer interactions during play. The social play continuum was considered, but dismissed because it focused on play within a structured resourced provision and therefore had a Western perspective. Additionally, the PIPPS scale appeared to be too focused on certain behaviours. Thus, it appeared most appropriate to draw upon relevant literature, where cultural influences had also been considered. The second question of how children used space in their play was examined, again, in relation to the literature due to a lack of existing research undertaken on the subject.

It is vital to acknowledge the limitations of the method used. Firstly, I analysed the data from a Western perspective and so it remained important to have an unrestricted view and to consider literature in relation to the context and culture. Also, the use of limited pertinent literature may have influenced me to be subjective. Being aware of these limitations was useful because the research remained impartial and was guided by appropriate literature in relation to the analysis.

Findings and Analysis

The following section will analyse the video observations in accordance with the research questions. Videos one and two will be explored to understand how children interact during their play and two different videos, three and four, will also be examined to provide an insight into how space is used in the Ghanaian playground. The literature review will be considered in relation to the findings and trends that arise from the observations will be established.

All the observations that were analysed were undertaken during the children’s lunchtime. All children in the school had lunchtime together and so there were approximately one hundred and twenty children in the playground with three teachers supervising.

How do Ghanaian children interact with their peers during play?

Observation one included two five-year-old boys playing a hand clapping game. They sat with their feet touching throughout, creating a space for the interaction. They maintained mutual attention in this game without communicating with others, who were outside the interaction space until nearing the end of the footage. Throughout the observation the two boys regularly smiled at each other and showed high levels of mutual gaze, which according to Argyle’s (1996) theory, is a sign of friendliness. The boy at the bottom of the still image to the right, was watching the game for the duration of the observation and so was indirectly part of the interaction. He remained close to the boys until the girl to the right of the pair intervened, where he moved back but still observed. This could suggest that he felt uncomfortable by the girl’s involvement and so tried to regain equilibrium by reducing proximity (Doherty-Sneddon, 2003). The girl used touch to interact with the pair during the observation as seen in the picture overleaf. More touching of the other can suggest a sign of dominance (Argyle, 1996). However, with Carta (2009) recognising that Africa is a contact culture, the use of touch may be the norm for offering help to the boys. The boy to her left interacted with her through touch, by hitting out to inform her he did not
want her involvement. His partner then tried to restart the hand clapping game but the boy continued the interaction with the girl through brief eye contact and tried to grab her as she walked off. This could indicate that he was trying to re-establish an equilibrium. It could be implied that the children in this interaction showed resilience. The pair whose game was interrupted, the girl that interrupted it and the boy who tried to reconnect an interaction after the dispute, all showed this trait because they were independent and did not appear offended by the situation. It could be asserted that this is due to a range of factors including that Ghana is a collectivist community (LeFebvre and Franke, 2013) and children spend a lot of time with each other and so learn to be resilient. Additionally, from other observations, children did not tend to seek adult guidance but resolved conflicts amongst themselves, as was seen in this interaction. Peer interaction encourages children to learn conflict resolution (Guralnick, 1993; Topping and Ehyl, 1998) which correlates with the evidence from the observations.

Corsaro (2005) discussed the concept of interpretive reproduction where children recreate observations made on older peers and adults. There were some observations that have not been examined in these findings of older children playing games, which younger children have tried to recreate for instance, the hand clapping game that is being discussed. This could suggest that children learn games from older peers. One interpretation might be that the girl was interrupting the game because she was offering guidance to the boys on how to play the game.

Observation two showed nine girls playing a group game. The children were singing a chant and talking continuously throughout this observation. Although two boys joined the game at the end of the observation, it was interesting that most of the participants were of the same gender. Smith (2010) stated that same gender play often occurs across cultures. However, the girls did not discourage the boys participating in the game.

The use of touch was apparent throughout this game. Again, in referring to Argyle’s theory, it might indicate that the girl in the orange dress was seeking hierarchy in the group by being the participant who touches all the feet. On the other hand, Doherty-Sneddon (2003) recognised some cultures show higher levels of touch than others. Similarly discussed in observation one, Africa is predominately a contact culture which could disregard Argyle’s theory here. The image to the right displays when other peers joined the game. The use of touch continues to be evident here with all participants in the game using it naturally,
suggesting it is a general tendency. This could perhaps strengthen the argument that touch is an important part of Ghana’s culture and thus of children’s interaction.

Eye contact was evident throughout this video. When the girl in the orange dress touches her peers’ feet, the children acknowledge the touch through eye contact. As previously discussed, this demonstrates awareness and friendliness. The facial expressions also suggest this is a friendly interaction because they smiled at times of mutual gaze. When others joined the game, the children did not discourage this but adapted the game and made room for new participants as if this were routine procedure.

How is playground space used in children’s play?

Observation three showed a mixed gender group of children preparing to play a group game. The children used the space in such a way where the children were in a circle; many games in the school were organised like this and I saw this in films one, two and four also. This type of arrangement could capture the concept of social play which encourages body language that is open and suggests that others can join in the game, reinforcing the idea that Africa is a collectivist community.

The children did not show high levels of physical activity during this game. The children moved around each other but stayed close in proximity. It could be inferred that this is because there is limited space for games that involve such levels of activity as suggested by Delidou (2015), who stated that when the play space is larger, children tend to be more active. Because the children appeared to be in close proximity, this meant there was space in the playground which was not used in this observation so perhaps there could have been an opportunity for more physical activity. Equally, it might be considered that if all children were fully active, then there would be very limited space. Perhaps the reason there is playground space unused in this interaction is because the children are immersed in small scale collaborative play that does not require large amounts of space.

White (2011) acknowledged that being outdoors allows children to play and to be involved in large scale and small scale play. As seen above, this footage showed a group of children playing together. In the same observation, there were
three children playing as well, again mixed gender which can be seen on the right. This supports White’s point and implies that children play in different group sizes at this school. It is interesting, to see the common theme where children often organise themselves in a circle during play. This could indicate that children create their own play space so that their games are not interrupted by others play experiences, which may occur in a playground that is relatively small for the number of children or perhaps be influenced by the touch culture.

It is interesting that children observed in this footage are of similar age. The observation in which the footage also shows older children, again of similar age brackets, sitting and playing in groups. Each of the groups created a space in which to play and interact, whilst remaining discrete from the other age groups. It could be suggested that this is because they are playing different games, although as previously discussed, younger children play games similar to their older peers. However, other observations that have not been examined in these findings, showed children of mixed age groups interacting with each other.

Observation four was of several children playing a group game. Again, the participants did not show high levels of physical activity but were close in proximity to each other. The children moved around each other whilst singing a chant. Again, the game did not require large amounts of space, the children once more created their own play space by repeatedly circulating around the same area. The children were showing common goals and playing in a way to suggest this is a popular game to be played in the playground because all the children knew what to do. It appears that many of the games played in the playground, had rules and most children knew them. It could be proposed that this is because collectivist communities are regarded as being highly cooperative in play (Keenan and Evans, 2009), thus having games with rules means all children can participate and be involved. It could be suggested that if children have common aims in their play then having a large space is not a factor that is needed. However, further research would be needed to explore this hypothesis. Barbour (1999) and Sutterby and Frost (2006) both suggested that traditional playgrounds, with fixed equipment can limit social play. There was an absence of such equipment and children appeared to be extremely sociable with peers, which could consolidate this point.

The children in the background of the observation who were playing other games and interacting with each other, stayed close in proximity. Interestingly again, there was clear playground space but other factors may have contributed to the reason why all children did not use it for example, the clear space was not in the shade.

**Conclusion**

This case study aimed to gain understanding of how children in one school in Ghana interacted with their peers and used space during their play. This aim has been exceeded my expectations, particularly in demonstrating how extensively play can be observed.

Africa has been recognised as a collectivist community; children showed high levels of cooperation within play (Keenan and Evans, 2009). This was apparent in the analysis through repeated observations of positive group play. Children were in close proximity to
each other and used positive facial expressions and touch as part of their interaction. A clear
trend that arose throughout all observations was the use of touch. It has been established
that this non-verbal cue is important within this community; Ghana is recognised as a
contact culture. From the analysis, touch has been identified as a positive or neutral form of
interaction. This result was unexpected, as touch within interaction is typically associated
with negative behaviour or that it is discouraged in everyday practice in the United Kingdom
(UK) from my perspective. Children also used eye contact as part of their interaction to show
an awareness of other's actions. This mutual gaze has been highlighted as a sign of
friendliness. Children often played in mixed gender groups which was interesting because it
contradicted what the literature suggested (Smith, 2010) and my regular observations within
everyday practice. Additionally, interpretive reproduction was evident because children were
observed playing games that could have, perhaps been learnt from older peers. This may
have arisen because children of all ages play and interact on the same playground.

Moreover, children showed levels of resilience by resolving conflicts amongst themselves
quickly without changing the dynamics rather than seeking adult support. Consequently, this
could indicate that children may develop resilience because of their consistent interactions
with older peers. Within practice in the UK, I have often experienced how children are reliant
on adult guidance to resolve conflicts. Therefore, these observations have strengthened the
argument that children within this school are part of a close community and the children
show high levels of friendliness and cooperation within interaction. Furthermore, perhaps
children within this school learn to become more resilient as a result of being able to resolve
their own conflicts, which is promoted through interaction (Gulalnick, 1993; Topping and
Ehyl, 1998). Perhaps, a recommendation could be that schools in UK could adopt an
integrated approach in which children of all ages interact together during playtime at times.

An underlying theme that was evident from the observations was that children created their
own spaces within play interactions. The children often organised themselves in circles and
were close in proximity which again reinforces the idea of a close community culture within
the school. This organisation also indicated that children in this school were tactile in using
space. Large and small scale play was recognised; children created interaction spaces for
their play to perhaps discourage interruption from other’s play experiences in a playground
that was relatively small. This layout also allowed other children to join in easily and, as a
result of children playing common games, many children played in different social groups.

The observations highlighted that space influenced play experiences. Children showed low
physical activity levels and played games that required little space. Other factors also
influenced the use of space with play for example, the children playing in the shaded areas.
Despite this, limited space allowed children to immerse themselves in social play contexts
which could be perceived as positive because the community culture was reinforced. Having
limited play equipment may have also encouraged social play as indicated by Barbour
(1999) and Sutterby and Frost (2006). This could be because none of the observations
showed the use of traditional playground equipment and children were very sociable,
interacting consistently and positively within observations. However, it should be
acknowledged that observations were not made with the inclusion of play equipment and
this could be researched further. From this analysis, it has become apparent that space is a
valuable commodity within children’s play and it can be influenced by a range of factors.

Within this school, the limited space and equipment meant that children were increasingly
social with each other which fits comfortably with the collectivist culture that Ghana shares.
This was initially not anticipated, and I had not appreciated the influence space can have on
children’s play experiences and was used to seeing spaces filled with equipment and
resources within my own practice. This is something I could reflect on further to influence my
practice.

On reflection, it was beneficial to record the footage as it offered a more authentic view of
the play context. However, it would have been interesting to see whether play experiences
changed depending on the some of the influences noted within the analysis. For example, to
investigate whether children used space the same way during a cooler time where children did not require the shade, a larger playground space or the addition of other equipment. Additionally, for future practice, I could consider this research within my own practice and it would be interesting to observe how children in the UK use these themes within their play experiences.

The research has emphasised that play is a universal characteristic that is diverse and varies in different contexts and cultures. It is vital to consider influences within play and to look from a perspective that is open and not restricted or biased by the researchers own experiences, for example, culture. The case study has allowed me to appreciate the fascinating coverage of how interaction and space is used within play. This case study highlighted a positive atmosphere within this school environment during children’s play. Children played with each other in a positive and friendly manner and showed collaboration and community within their interactions and games. They were tactile in using space effectively and this correlated with their social values. Children were resilient and resolved conflicts quickly without changing the dynamics of the play atmosphere. The children also played with others of the same and opposite gender and were encouraging in letting others join in games. I was refreshed by these findings and would encourage such an atmosphere within my own provision.
Reference list


