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Review of the International Play Policies and Their Contribution To Supporting a Child's Right to Play

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Review of the international play policies and their contribution to supporting a child's right to play

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Abstract

Play is recognised as a fundamental children's right protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Despite legal and constitutional requirements for ensuring children's right to play, there are few international policies dedicated to play. This paper seeks to use a critical discourse analysis lens to compare the current international policies dedicated to play and identify examples of good practice and perceived barriers to the successful development and implementation of play policies.

KEYWORDS

children's rights, play, policy

INTRODUCTION

Play, the main occupation of childhood provides opportunities to develop physical, mental, emotional and social health (Sutton-Smith, 1997). The importance of play and recreation in the life of every child has been acknowledged by the international community and protected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The UNCRC (1989) ratified by 196 countries is the first legally binding international instrument recognising human rights for children. Children's access to play and recreational activities is recognised internationally despite few international policies specifically dedicated to play, although countries include play within their educational and child welfare policies (IPA, 2013). A rights-based approach strengthens the

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recognition of play as a human right and identifies the relevance of play strategies and policies in striving to meet and protect this right for every child (Hayes & Bradley, 2009; Voce, 2006).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) established to oversee the exercise of the rights of the child, confirms that the UNCRC is to 'be applied holistically in every childhood, taking account of the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005). Bantula and Paya (2020) note that to ensure the rights of the child are meaningful, a state must also promote measures and build strategies that ensure these rights are recognised. To this end, the CRC receive periodic reports from countries on the measures in place to bring the rights of the child to fruition. There is a wide variation in the interpretation and implementation of the UNCRC as the Convention does not define how the principles it enshrines should be implemented in individual countries (Smith, 2009) and interpretations are influenced by differing needs, resources, political systems, cultures and ideologies resulting in variations in the prioritisation and relegation of its principles across nations (Paya & Bantula, 2019).

A policy can be defined as a purposeful course of action taken by those in power in pursuit of certain goals or objectives (Sapru, 1994). The five stages of policy development include problem identification, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation and policy evaluation (Sapru, 1994). The rationale for each play policy is to recognise children's right to play as contained in Article 31 of the UNCRC (1989) thus increasing recognition of the value of play and opportunities for play. There is a vision within each play policy with a common statement regarding the importance of play and the opportunities for play. The CRC has identified four principles underlining children as equal human beings, confirming childhood as valuable in itself and not solely as preparation for adulthood (UNICEF, 2019). The four principles identified as non-discrimination, best interests of the child, the right to survival and development, and the views of the child. The CRC produced comment number 17 (2013) to enhance understanding of the importance of Article 31, to promote respect for the rights articulated under Article 31, and to outline the obligations of agents, including governments, under the UNCRC and considers that policy will fulfil a key role in shaping how children's right to play will be realised.

This review paper seeks to identify and compare international play policy documents that are available in the public domain, from both print and electronic sources. The chosen approach to document analysis involved critical discourse analysis (CDA) which has been widely used for policy analysis by academics as 'it can be employed to identify dominant, marginal, oppositional or alternative discourses within policy texts' (Cummings et al., 2020). Policy documents are formed, disseminated and legitimised within complex chains and networks of events that is, committee meetings, reports, debates, press statements and press conferences, etc (Fairclough, 2013). Hornridge (2011) considers that the contents of policy documents can be used to legitimise already existing government policies through presenting a future vision which can be used to convince stakeholders of the need for action, illuminated through CDA. Fairclough (2013) argues that processes of change are divorced from social actors, histories, time and place, which can also be illuminated through CDA. Cummings et al. (2020) advocate a four-phase research process which involves selection of the topic approached by focus on texts, the identification of suitable texts, consideration of text development and use words in texts to identify social questions. This approach creates an opportunity for discussion while identifying any need for further discourse. The review topic selected is international play policies and their support of a child's right to play, applying CDA of these policies, consideration of those involved in developing the policy, and how this relates to the discussion. The final phase identifies social questions to create an opportunity for discussion.

METHOD

For the purposes of this study the author has grouped the 196 countries into five regions (groups) as identified by the United Nations ([Diagram 1](#)).

The study included all policy documents with specific reference to play in the title and strategy documents for play, play spaces and playgrounds. This study focuses on the dedicated play policies of six Western, anglophone countries—Wales, Ireland, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Canada. It was found that in many non-Western or non-anglophone countries, where play is considered in public policy it is typically incorporated into education policies. Whitebread (2012), in his report on the value of children's play recognised both increased challenges faced by modern Euro-American societies with regard to play and increasing awareness within these societies of the importance of play. He identifies significant limitation of play opportunities linked to urbanisation and contemporary urban lifestyles, a related risk-aversity in parents and tensions within education systems. He also evidences awareness of this limitation of opportunity among parents and policymakers. His report associates with modern Euro-American societies a view of play it calls 'culturally cultivated play', which prioritises and encourages play. There has been growing awareness that children have increasingly fewer opportunities for play in urban spaces, in educational settings and in the family home. As the importance of these lost opportunities has been recognised, parents and advocates for children have looked to restore them to children. The dedicated play policies of Western, anglophone, heavily urbanised countries can be seen as a response to burgeoning awareness of the importance of play and as a response to a society which has developed in ways hostile to the needs of children, in which children are increasingly deprived of opportunities for appropriate play. While Whitebread (2012) suggests that these challenges are becoming a worldwide issue, at the time of his report the issues were more evident in urbanised Western countries. The six play policies examined here were instituted between 2002 and 2021. The author consulted Scopus database, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) database, ScienceDirect database to source relevant material.

The analysis involved examining and interpreting the documents to gain understanding, elicit meaning and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), triangulating the information alongside the States periodic reports submitted to the CRC who oversee the application of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by States Parties. Each State must periodically submit reports to the CRC on their progress on the implementation of the Convention on Rights of the Child. The CRC examines each report and responds with observations.

The researcher accessed six documents complying with the study criteria. The documents included one from the Americas region and five from Europe & Central Asia region ([Table 1](#)).

The Play Strategy from Play Australia 2020–2025 document was excluded as Play Australia is a branch of the International Play Association (IPA), an international non-governmental organisation with the purpose of protecting, preserving and promoting the child's right to play as a fundamental human right. It is important to be aware of the differing contexts, cultural, political, economic and sociological which may impact policy as what may be perceived as positive in one country may be viewed negatively elsewhere. The contents of policy documents are subject to political processes and

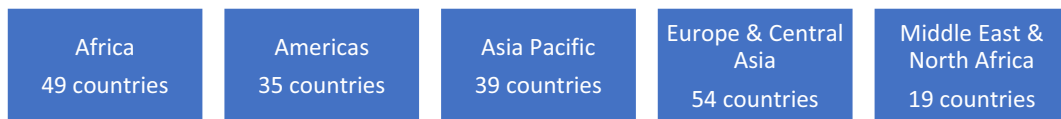


DIAGRAM 1 Five regions identified.

TABLE 1 Regions with national play policy or strategy documents.

Region	Country	Document title	Year published	Ref/link to other policy
Americas	Canada	Unstructured Play Position Statement Developing a Play Policy	2018 2019	√
Europe & Central Asia	Ireland	Ready Steady Play! A national play policy	2004	√
	England	The Play Strategy	2008	√
	Scotland	Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision	2013	√
	Wales	Play Policy (Statement)	2002	√
		Manifesto for Children's play in Wales	2021	
Northern Ireland	Play and Leisure Statement	2011	√	

can be used to support or legitimise existing government policies by presenting a vision of the future (Hornridge, 2011). Policy documents can therefore be used to present an inspirational vision which may convince stakeholders of a need for action (Cummings et al., 2020). This comparison of public policies avoids replication of failures, maximises the use of resources, increases effectiveness and efficiency, and enables shared learning (Bowen, 2009). Technology facilitates a global village making successes and failures of policy more visible and allowing learning from experiences.

Contributors and context

The six documents include in the study are all western democracies with political systems emerging from the British parliamentary model influenced by international mechanisms including the OECD. The contributors to the policies include public health, education, early childhood care and education, housing, local authorities, policing services, psychologists, child developmental psychologists, parents and residents' associations, and governmental agencies involved with children. Voce (2015) notes that the 'optimum conditions for playing are those which support and respond to children's own initiative, provide them with resources and space to manipulate and explore, and give them permission to be spontaneous and expressive'. Identifying barriers and opportunities in realising this aim is fundamental to progressing play policies and warrants engagement with a wide range of stakeholders in addition to contributors already mentioned. Contributions should also be sought from planning, architecture and landscape architecture, traffic, parks, leisure and play services (Voce, 2015) as each can impact children's play.

Consideration

The policy documents were considered from the perspectives of Rationale, Objective, Appraisal, Monitoring, Evaluation and Feedback (ROAMEF) as elements of a policy (Table 2).

TABLE 2 Rationale of each included document.

Policy name	Country and year	Quote
Ready Steady Play!	Ireland 2004	'An Ireland where the importance of play is recognised so that children experience a range of quality play opportunities to enrich their childhood'
A Play Policy for Wales	Wales 2002	'Government in Wales to continue to prioritise play... commitments to ensure children's opportunities for play increase and improve'
The Play Strategy	England 2008	'all recognise that play is a vital ingredient of a happy and healthy childhood, ...ambition for world class opportunities for play in every area'
Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision	Scotland 2013	'critical importance of play, as well as our obligation to protect our children's ability to play to ensure all children and young people can access play opportunities in a range of settings which offer variety, adventure and challenge'
Play and Leisure Policy Statement	Northern Ireland (NI) 2011	'the crucial role of play and leisure in children's lives is understood and afforded the appropriate consideration'
Unstructured Play Position Statement	Canada 2018	'recognises unstructured play as a child's right and a critical component to child and youth health and well-being'

The development of the play policy is to address the identified problem. The policy then lists objectives which describe its vision and identifies specific goals. The shared objectives of the policies in this review include six common objectives (Diagram 2).

Involving stakeholders

Stakeholders are those affected by, or can affect, a service actions, objectives and policies (Tusla, 2018). In practice stakeholder engagement identifies areas of agreement and disagreement while providing opportunities to understand what might be driving key stakeholder differences. Stakeholder input may also help articulate the values of the broader community affected and align policy recommendations with these expectations by building mutual understanding, credibility, which may increase the likelihood of policies being implemented as intended by the key stakeholders (Burton et al., 2009).

The Canadian document on developing a Play Policy advocates collaboration with all parties who may be affected by the policy and this process includes parents and children. The Unstructured Play position statement (2019) reinforces the need for stakeholder engagement by highlighting the impact various policies, attitudes, societal pressures, financial limitation, access and decision-making can have on children's play. In 2000, the Welsh National Assembly commissioned a review of open access play provision and the Play 2000 grant scheme. This report surveyed local authorities and agencies concerned with children's play across Wales without direct liaison with children and young people. The review informed the rationale for the play policy noting benefits of involving community in planning for play opportunities,

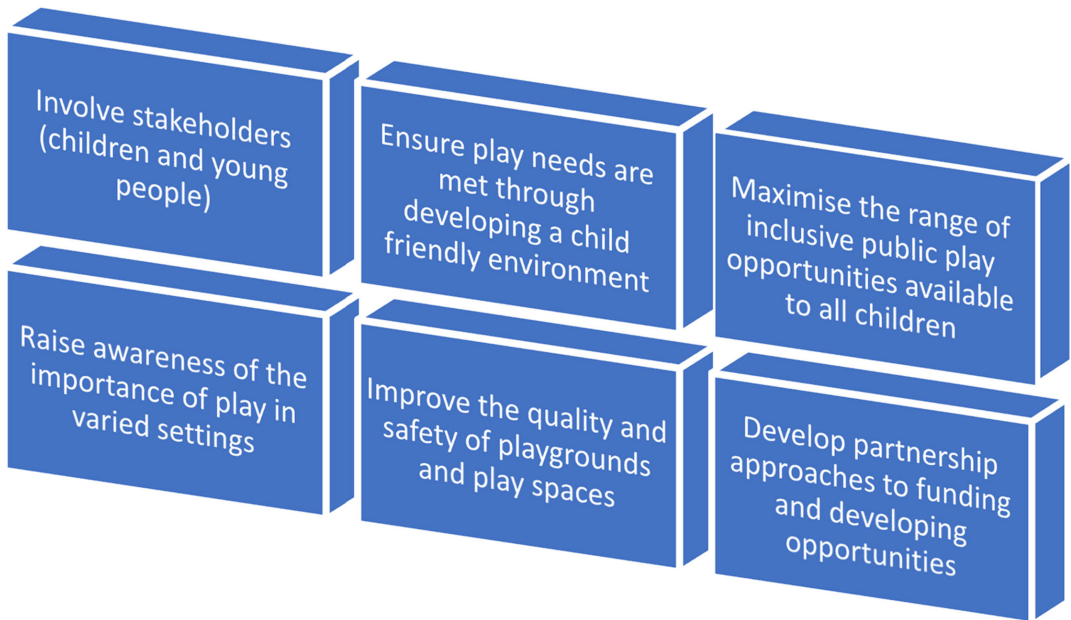


DIAGRAM 2 Six common objectives.

including involving the wider community to contribute to the process of social inclusion and building community capacity; also noting that ‘the process in which parents engage to provide for their children’s play, makes a significant contribution in realising the objectives of many government initiatives’ (Rationale for National Play Policy for Wales, p. 8). Wales, the first government to develop a national play policy, produced its play policy (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002) and protected a child’s right to play by requiring local authorities to assess the sufficiency for play opportunities for children. These assessments have been conducted since 2014 with an annual review and update every 3 years (Play Sufficiency Assessment Regulations, 2012).

The play strategy for England (2008) acknowledged the need to involve children, young people and the local community in the design and construction of play spaces ensuring children’s views are considered and respected. This included a national indicator for local authorities to seek children’s views and their satisfaction with their local parks and play spaces. A draft guidance was planned for local service providers (Children’s Trusts and Strategic Partnerships) to respond to children’s play needs. The Northern Ireland (NI) Play and Leisure Statement (2011) advocates engaging children and young people through the play and leisure partnership structures with local councils. The common objective of including children and young people’s views is actioned within the Irish play policy (2004), by involving the National Children’s Office (NCO), local authorities, voluntary, community and private sector. The Play Strategy for Scotland states that ‘children and young people’s views must be considered...and that children’s participation and ideas are encouraged and supported’ (Scottish Government, 2013) through engaging with children and young people and identifying examples of positive engagement being used to good effect in planning, designing and management of play spaces. Thus, supporting UNCRC (1989) Article 12 promoting children’s participation in decisions that affect them and considering children’s views. Children are the participants in play and are therefore the experts in play (Cohen, 2018).

Developing a child friendly environment to meet play needs

Child friendly environments stimulate the creativity and mental abilities of children and enhances their physical development (Nour, 2013). Child friendly environments include access to natural spaces where children can independently explore their surrounding environment (Thompson & Philo, 2004). Child friendly environments take the view of the children into consideration, creating an environment where children have the right to be heard and are involved in the decision-making process, by incorporating their views (Hart, 2002; UNICEF, 2004). Agarwal et al. (2021) consider the best play environment to be designed around children's natural play requirements and in consideration of the different types of play. Each of the six documents included in this study value a need for child friendly spaces to play.

In England the strategy seeks to provide a variety of safe, accessible, and exciting places to play in every residential area and 'routes to children's play spaces are safe and accessible to all children'. The play places will facilitate families to share and enjoy leisure time as 'parks and open spaces will be attractive and welcoming to children and young people, are well maintained and well used'. The Irish play policy identified road safety as the most prominent issue for children's play and planned engagement with local authorities to address this concern from a traffic management and safe play space perspective, while the Welsh play manifesto also identified road safety as a barrier to play and committed to ensuring that all children 'have access to rich stimulating environments, free from inappropriate risk'. The UNICEF Child Friendly cities initiative to create cities which implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child at the local level, including the right to play through provision of opportunities for children to play. The Irish policy advocates the use of creative landscaping... 'as a means of providing new play opportunities for children' and 'having regard to the need to develop child-friendly environments'.

Scotland aims to ensure all children and young people can access play opportunities in a range of settings which offer variety, adventure, and challenge in free and safe environments. The vision being 'children must be able to play freely and safely while learning to manage risks and make choices about where, how and when they play according to their age, stage, ability and preference'. The strategy divides the opportunities into four domains which include the home, at nursery and school, community and positive support for play. The NI Play and Leisure statement refers to inclusive and accessible play spaces as a key impact area while recognising the need to create a welcoming environment for children and young people. This need is echoed in the Canadian document that aims to address the developmental needs of children by providing appropriate, stimulating and challenging play that stimulates multiple senses, based on universal design principles and accessible to all. A child friendly environment is implicit in this aspiration.

To improve the quality and safety of playground and play spaces

Safety is implicit in welcoming and child friendly play spaces and is further developed within the concept of quality play spaces. The Canadian guidance document identifies seven key features of high-quality play environments as challenging across developmental stages, opportunities that stimulate multiple senses, outdoor in a variety of weather conditions, balanced between thrilling and safety, based on universal designs, including loose parts and natural elements, and accessible. These features are referred to in the various documents but addressed within sections or chapters of the documents. The England Strategy considers quality features in the context of more places to play accessible to all children, play spaces that are exciting and places to play

cognisant of weather. The vision includes 'safe and accessible routes to play spaces for all children and young people' ...in every residential area (2008), advocating supporting local leadership to build 'communities that value and respond to children, young people and parents' demands for safe and well maintained places to play'. The provision of play across developmental stages is considered throughout childhood by improving play opportunities for all children in schools, children centres and local services. The Scottish Strategy addresses this objective across the four domains where all children and young people enjoy play opportunities appropriate to their age, stage, needs and preferences. The Scottish document includes 'outdoor free play in stimulating spaces with access to nature on a daily basis in early learning and childcare, nursery and school'. This strategy envisages 'all children and young people have sufficient time and space for playing' and that 'children are able to play freely and safely'. The Welsh government is committed to ensuring all children have access to 'rich stimulating environments, free from inappropriate risk and full of challenge'. The NI document seeks to increase the extent to which all children and young people encounter challenge, stimulation and acceptable levels of risk in their experience of play and leisure, while acknowledging the barriers to play and leisure. In Ireland an objective of the policy is to improve the quality and safety of playgrounds and play areas conforming to standards for play equipment and surfacing, consumer feedback to local authorities, training in playwork skills and establishing a network of play development officers in local authorities, with a national Play Resource Centre to provide information, advice and support to actively develop a play network. Playwork involves training to support challenging play opportunities, and to create and enhance flexible play environments that promote unstructured play without directing or organising the play (www.playscotland.org).

Raise awareness of the importance of play in varied settings

The existence of a play policy or strategy indicates a recognition of the importance of play (Paya & Bantula, 2019) and an awareness of the need to promote play. Each of the documents included in this study acknowledges the UNCRC right of the child to play and the states own responsibilities in this regard. The vision of each of the states includes raising awareness of the developmental benefits of play and increasing the understanding of the importance of play.

The Irish policy notes its goal 'to develop a holistic approach to childhood in which the importance of play and child-friendly cities and towns is widely recognised and appreciated'. This ambitious goal is to be met through health promotion, engaging voluntary and statutory groups, including play in standards of early learning and care, the importance of play in education settings and sharing research on children's play. The NI policy considers play and leisure to be 'essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth as well as for intellectual, educational development and achievement'. Play also gives children the opportunity 'to increase their understanding of the world around them and can be a vehicle for intergenerational sharing and understanding'. The NI policy aims to promote greater recognition of the benefits of play among parents, embed the policy within schools and youth provision. This policy acknowledges the importance of play and leisure in 'improving outcomes for all children and young people across six areas of focus including health; enjoyment, learning and stability; living in safety and stability; experiencing economic and environmental wellbeing; contributing positively to community and society; and living in a society that respects their rights'. The Welsh play policy (2002) recognises play as a fundamental and integral part of healthy development for both children and the society

in which they live. This policy aims to extend ‘the range of environments and opportunities available for children’s play while continuing to have due regard for their ...wellbeing’.

The Scottish play strategy (2013) values play as a life-enhancing daily experience for all children and young people in all settings, noting that all children should have the space and time to play. The vision for this strategy is to improve play experiences of all children and young people, by ensuring access to ‘play opportunities in a range of settings which offer variety, adventure and challenge’. The England play strategy (2008) considers that children, young people and their parents all recognise that play is a vital ingredient of a happy and healthy childhood supporting children’s physical, emotional, social and educational development. The shared aim of the strategy is that all children enjoy a range of supported, quality, safe, local places to play informed by shared understanding of the value of play.

Maximise the range of public opportunities available to all children

In order for the rights of the child to be meaningful a state must put these rights into practice by promoting measures and building strategies to ensure the rights are recognised (Bantula & Paya, 2020). Barriers to play are identified in the documents of this study. The England strategy has a vision to provide attractive and welcoming play spaces with children and young people as stakeholders, providing information about local play opportunities, and producing a toolkit to support the vision. The Scottish strategy (2013) imagines daily play for all children as valued, encouraged and supported within communities. The Planning Scotland Act (2019) now placing a statutory duty on local authorities to undertake play sufficiency assessments as part of their strategic planning. While the NI policy (2009) includes a plan to service unused council land for play spaces and identifies barriers to the utilisation of land and buildings for play and leisure. The promotion of design approaches based on inclusion, integration and accessibility to inform the design of new and refurbishment of existing play and leisure opportunities stated within the NI play and leisure policy implementation plan (2011). The plan involves a cross sectoral approach considering community use of school estates outside of school time, and promoting the availability of community-based transport so children can access play spaces. The NI policy aims to develop child and young person friendly communities with well-maintained parks and open spaces supporting play and leisure, involving stakeholders in creating their communities. The Irish policy advocates cross sectoral engagement with multiagency buy-in, allocating responsibility to local areas to create a local play policy including a designated officer responsible for developing play and recreation activity in the local area. Like NI, the State is assessing the potential for provision of school buildings for play and recreation purposes outside school times. The Irish policy document involves using public library services as ‘gateway to the world of knowledge for children and to stimulate their minds and imagination’ while the area development boards will identify and advertise the availability, level, range and standard of public play facilities. The Welsh document recognises that children have reduced freedom to play due to traffic dominance and suggests developing guidance to support street play projects. This document, like the NI and Irish policies, suggests schools make their outdoor space available for playing outside of school times. This supports the development of more opportunities for children to play by ensuring all initiatives recognise that play is essential, supporting staffed playwork and initiatives of training for those whose work impacts children.

Develop partnership approaches to funding and developing opportunities

The provision of quality, inclusive, accessible opportunities for play requires infrastructure and resources. The Irish policy suggests exploring private investment in local play facilities and plans corporate community involvement at national level. The Scottish strategy (2013) and Welsh policy (2002) and English play strategy (2008) also included the third sector in providing partnership for play provision. In NI the policy recognises that no one organisation has the authority, power or resources to meet the objectives and, advocates engagement with multiple stakeholders to realise the vision and objectives of the policy. The implementation plan involves shared local partnership, pooling resources and expertise to meet local community's needs. This approach acknowledges a multi-agency effort alongside increasing awareness of the importance of play for children among stakeholders. The Canadian guidance document considers play in everyday environments of children, and partnerships with all parties who may be affected by policy with shared responsibility, accountability and authority for implementation. This policy identifies the key providers of children's unstructured play opportunities, stating the role of a play policy while advocating for collaborative decision making by all who may be affected.

Appraisal, monitoring and evaluation

A key aspect of policy development requires that implementation is subject to review and reflection, so that lessons are learned, adaptations are made, and policy is abandoned in response to unsatisfactory findings (Cerna, 2013). Monitoring and evaluation is recognised as integral to policy success and successful policy implementation requires appraisal of the impact and monitoring of progress. Monitoring is tracking performance and progress against the plan (WHO, 2016), conducted for operational reasons so lessons can be learned, and corrective action taken if needed, completed at regular intervals throughout the implementation and is done by staff involved in the program. Evaluation assesses the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of policies and programmes and is done to ensure the policy addresses the identified problems and objectives, and to inform the process (learn lessons). Evaluation is done at specific times of the process and is completed by persons not involved in the design or implementation (Vedung, 2017).

The policy documents included in this study addressed the stages of monitoring and evaluation and embedded them within the policy. The Irish play policy included an annual evaluation to be conducted by the NCO and reported to government, partnerships with organisations involved with children, and an independent external evaluation at the end of the allocated timeframe. Additionally, Ireland's report to the CRC would be informed by the play policy progress. The Play Strategy for Scotland Action Plan (2015) addresses implementation and evaluation by outlining who, what, why and when. This includes a timeframe of short, medium or long term and outlines responsibility for each action of the strategy. The England play strategy lists key actions for the implementation of the strategy and a broad timeline. The NI play and leisure policy implementation plan outlines actions and target dates for the policy. The target dates are set within a 3-year time frame (2012–2015) to be prepared for submission in advance of the budgeting process.

Feedback incomplete for all documents

The feedback stage of the policy process remains incomplete as per the policy documents. The England play strategy was planned to progress over 12 years, but was stalled due to the financial crash of 2007. There has been learning from this play strategy which has informed play advocates and play workers in their efforts to advocate for the child's right to play. The Irish play policy has been reviewed with the report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child noting an increase in the number of playgrounds (CRC/C/IRL/3-4:136). NI has collated the feedback information and incorporated the data into its amended implementation action plan. The plan has revised target dates for the actions of the policy and is continuing to work towards full realisation of the policy. Wales has created a play manifesto calling on government to continue its commitment to prioritising play, to support the implementation of the statutory Play Sufficiency Duty, and to create cross policy commitments to increase and improve children's opportunities to play. The Ministerial Play Review (2019–2022) was published with fifteen recommendations over six themes including aligning key legislation, duty of and funding for play sufficiency, spatial justice, playwork provision, training and qualifications, play and education. The Scottish play strategy has been reviewed from the perspective of inclusive play (2015) and supported by the Planning Act (2019).

DISCUSSION

This review shows that few, only six, of the 196 countries who have ratified the UNCRC have a policy or strategy dedicated to play. While this is disappointing in the drive to recognise children's rights it is perhaps indicative of the position play holds in terms of necessity for children. The UNCRC allocated children's rights under three P's as *provision* for basic needs such as food and accommodation, *protection* from abuse or punishment or arrest without proper judicial process, and *participation* to express their views on matters that affect them and for their views to be respected. These six documents have positively impacted children's lives through increased understanding, focus and development of the importance of play. The current focus on improving and enhancing children's lives through play evidences the positive impact of the policies. The IPA has extended its influence internationally and connected the advocacy voices of play supported by these policies and their promotion of a child's right to play. Collectively they have enhanced understanding of play and positively impacted children.

Inadequate data systems

Determination of the state of play in each state, on how well the policy is working and its actual impact on the targeted group, underpins the need for good quality data systems (Byrne & Lundy, 2015). International statistics on children tend to use aggregated national data which ranks countries according to their performance on particular outcomes (Ennew, 2011), with a focus on key child development and well-being indicators rather than the full range of children's rights (Lundy et al., 2012). The lack of comprehensive data, qualitative and quantitative, child-centred and sufficiently disaggregated, raises concerns on the extent to which the impact

of strategies and policies can be accurately measured and government delivery for children fully assessed (Byrne & Lundy, 2015).

Delays in reviewing impact of policy, financial issues, legal status

The delay in the review of policy coupled with the extended implementation timeline for policy, further evidences the position attributed to the right to play within government priority and public understanding. The withdrawal of funding for the delivery of the England play strategy following the financial crisis of 2008 was a significant setback for the play movement in England. Wales has prioritised play since producing their policy (2002) believing that play is critically important to all children in the development of their physical, social, mental, emotional and creative skills. The Welsh Government Play Sufficiency Legislation (2010) places a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities in their area thus supporting the development and provision of opportunities for children to play and has committed to acting on recommendations of the 2023 Ministerial Play Review (2023). The four UK nations created new government organisations to oversee the implementation of policy and created new training and qualifications in Playwork, all in support of the child's right to play informed by these policies.

Priorities for child well-being

The effect of the restriction of play opportunities in all settings during the initial impact of SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) has highlighted the importance of play in child development (Casey & McKendrick, 2022), and the impact of the pandemic on children is yet to be fully realised. Play is vulnerable in limited funding environments. The prevalence of poverty and inequality across the world results in challenges for implementing children's rights and limits the realisation of a child's right to play. The documents considered stem from countries in the Americas and Europe & Central Asia regions although the author notes that play is considered within other policy documents across the world in the areas of early childhood education and care, child protection, sport, physical activity and health.

Meeting identified objectives

Progress on the six common objectives of these documents has progressed in each of the states since publication of the documents. The emergence of National Play days and programs each year in Ireland, England, Scotland and NI, alongside play sufficiency assessment in Wales and Scotland evidences this progress. Perhaps the core objective now is to increase support from governments in raising awareness of the importance of play as this will positively impact each of the other objectives. The lack of consistent definition and terminology for play and play environments (Fisher et al., 2008; Houser et al., 2016; Siu et al., 2017), coupled with a sharing of play across many areas such as education, early childhood care, health and sport poses difficulties for clear understanding and commitment from public and governments, impacting the priority status of play policy and its implementation.

Weaknesses identified

The five key elements identified by Wright et al. (2019) regarding play policy in Scotland include space standards for play; design guidelines; levels of capital expenditure; levels of maintenance expenditure and supervision arrangements. In addition, three weaknesses were identified regarding the implementation plan, as vague aims and objectives, lack of instruments to implement the policy and poor procedural elements within the plan. These criticisms may also be applied to aspects of the Irish policy which stated vague objectives and target dates without timelines. There was an expectation of each local city and county to develop a play policy but no guidance or action plan. Local development boards were to assess the play facilities in local areas, without requirement to improve or develop them. The 2013 Irish state report to the CRC noted a significant increase in the number of playgrounds in the country but no detail regarding the types or quality of these play opportunities.

The English strategy with a 12-year vision while ambitious and detailed in its expectations and plan for children's play, had been paused as a result of austerity since 2008. There is now a renewed effort in England, supported by political groups (All Party Parliamentary Group), to extend the statutory duty on local authorities in place in Wales to be extended to England (Voce, 2015). In England the playing out street play project, 'Playing Out', has become a national movement providing children a safe space to play on their doorstep. This is coordinated by a national organisation intending that playing outside would be a normal everyday activity for all children.

Successful advancement of the state of play

The current state of play in Wales adopts a rights-based approach, holds clearly identified goals for quality play opportunities for all children and young people, has developed a play workforce, and has created a play network to support all play officers. The NI Play and Leisure Implementation plan presents a detailed and structured plan with target timelines for the policy. The target dates though revised, maintained a timeline. The plan is monitored by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM, 2011) with reports of progress thus monitoring implementation. The success of both the Welsh and NI policies in advancing the state of play evidences the need for clearly set out guidelines on the level, type and quality of play that a policy seeks to achieve.

Safety concerns limiting play opportunities

Concerns with safety and the need to supervise children when at play has negatively impacted opportunities for unstructured play (Bantula & Paya, 2020; Canning, 2007; Little et al., 2011; Sandseter, 2007). The concept of unstructured free play is re-emerging as important for child creativity, development and well-being (Patte, 2022). The seven universal design principles of equitable use, flexibility of use accommodating a range of individual preference and ability, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information communicating necessary information effectively, minimises hazards and adverse consequences, can be used efficiently and comfortable with a minimum of fatigue, and in an appropriate size and space, can address safety concerns while ensuring inclusive play for all children (Ginsberg, 2007; Lynch et al., 2020).

The emergence of the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic in 2020 impacted a child's right to play by restricting their opportunities to play and the types of play they can engage in. Social distancing coupled with the closure of face-to-face education and childcare services limited children's opportunities to play. The United Nations policy brief of April 2020 noted that 'Children are not the face of this pandemic but they risk being among its biggest victims'. This has also started a national conversation and renewed attention to the importance of play for all children which may also advance progress in supporting a child's right to play.

CONCLUSION

While the vision and action items outlined in these documents support a child's right to play, implementation of these policies and strategies has been impeded by financial restrictions, competing demands and economic and political instability. There is an overarching need to have national indicators to enable the recognition of the right of the child to play as 'to improve one must first measure'. Recognition of the value of play for every child is acknowledged internationally and measurement of each state's contribution to supporting this right would inform governments and policy makers thus strengthening support for the right to play. There is evidence to suggest that giving legal status to the UNCRC along with effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms could afford better protection of children's rights (Lundy et al., 2012). Childhood and play are intertwined, and children's play is central to who and what we are (Voce, 2015) and the benefits of all types of play have already been stated (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Powell, 2009; Whitebread, 2012). Play is accepted as fundamental to the development, health and well-being of children (White, 2012) therefore playing cannot be a secondary right for children. Voce (2015) states that no child has ever played to improve their life chances but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that in playing they do just that (Burghardt, 2005; Lester & Russell, 2008; Spinka et al., 2001; Sutton-Smith, 2003; Winnicott, 1971). While these policies emphasise play, their successful development and implementation, including accountability and adequate financial support, is required to assist States in meeting their responsibilities under the UNCRC.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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