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Nielsen, Lasse

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Teach Them to Play! Educational Justice and the Capability for Childhood Play

Lasse Nielsen

Philosophy, University of Southern Denmark

Email: lasseni@sdu.dk

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Abstract *Many consider play a natural part of childhood, and although there is disagreement in the literature on what essentially defines “play” in childhood, philosophical theories of play tend to support this initial consideration. But is childhood play also something we owe each other within a framework of educational justice? This is a question yet to be addressed. In this paper, I answer this question affirmatively. I take off from a generic account of educational justice and argue that childhood play should be considered a central entitlement of this account. I then argue in line with the capability approach that if we ought to protect childhood play, it should be children’s capability for play rather than the functioning of play that needs protection. I end by offering an account of the capability for childhood play.*

Introduction

Much academic work in the social sciences focuses on children’s health and wellbeing. Here, playful activities are considered a natural part of childhood behavior—something we applaud and value in its own right—and absence of willingness to play in children is often taken as a sign of pathology or social malfunctioning. In a recent article, Michael Luntley explores the philosophical importance of play for children’s cognitive learning abilities (Luntley 2018). Luntley’s overall argument is that when it comes to develop children to become good learners, “play’s the thing” because the skills of imagination and cognitive creativity we develop and train in childhood play founds the scaffold of cognition upon which we ground learning experiences.

So arguably, play is valuable. But is childhood play not only valuable—instrumentally and intrinsically—but also something that we owe each other under a framework of educational justice? Is the state required to redistribute opportunities for childhood play and secure a safe and healthy environment for playful activities in the educational system? This is

a question yet to be addressed, and it is the question I ask in this article. I end by concluding affirmatively, that there is an enforceable duty to protect childhood play, and that this duty must—informed by the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum—be met in the form of protection of the capability for play.

The argument has the following parts. First, I briefly lay out a generic account of educational justice to provide an argument for why primary school education should be owed to all under institutional distributive justice, both because primary education is a core element in any theory of educational justice and, because it makes people more equal in terms of opportunity to build and pursue particular individual life-plans. Second, I show how childhood play is constitutive for the value of education in both these senses and conclude that if justice is concerned with education it should also be concerned with childhood play. Third, a parallel additional argument is developed around the importance of play for social equality. Fourth and finally, I argue that the duty of justice to secure childhood play must be in the form of protection of play capability, not merely functioning. This concludes my argument.

Educational justice and social equality

It is common to distinguish between at least three general accounts of educational justice: *fair equality of opportunity in education*; *luck egalitarian educational equality* and *educational adequacy*. Here I will very briefly mention them only to conclude that quality primary education is a central requirement on any them.

The first position comes out of Rawlsian liberal egalitarianism. In order to live up to the principles of justice (Rawls 1971)—and the principle of fair equality of opportunity in particular—education becomes important as a way of leveling the playing field in regards to social opportunities. Educational egalitarians sympathetic to the Rawlsian framework of

justice as fairness has developed this line of reasoning into a quite strong argument for equality of opportunity in education (Brighouse 2002a; Schouten 2012). Harry Brighouse, for example, argues in line with Rawls' justice as fairness that "educational inequalities due to family backgrounds are unacceptable" because family backgrounds are arbitrary influences on fair equality of opportunity (Brighouse 2002b; 1998).

Luck egalitarians take a more radical stand (Segall 2013: 138-144). They think that the Rawlsian account of fair equality of opportunity is inadequate, because if we are concerned with equality of opportunity, luck egalitarians say, we should in principle consider all arbitrary (dis)advantages for children unjustified. This implies that also inequalities in natural talents and dispositions as well as inequalities stemming from differential educational preparation through parental upbringing should be considered cases of injustice.¹

Proponents of educational adequacy ground educational justice on some sufficiency standard rather than equality of opportunity. Elizabeth Anderson and Debra Satz argue that educational justice require effective access for all to quality primary education for reasons of citizenship and democratic equality but not necessarily for distributive equality (Anderson 2007; Satz 2007). My argument here allows for agnosticism about the standard of educational justice. All three accounts of educational justice—fair equality of opportunity, luck egalitarian equality of opportunity, and adequacy of education—capture the importance of equal access to primary education as central to justice. Thus, the argument for the importance of childhood play can begin from the quite uncontroversial assumption, that equal access to quality primary education is a necessary requirement of any plausible theory of educational justice. Let me call this the *generic educational equality account*.

The generic educational equality account has had great influence on not only educational justice, but also the literature on justice in health—especially through the unfolding of the Rawlsian account of social justice to incorporate health (Daniels 2008). But

interestingly, these two lines of influence seem to merge together in the recent years' development within health justice literature. This is so, because of the social determinants expansion that has been so widely acknowledged in the social and medical sciences—that the health system should not merely deliver health care but also take responsibility for an appropriate distribution of social determinants of health and wellbeing (Black 1982; Marmot 2005; Ruger 2004; Wolff 2009). The central message of this literature is that our level of health is very highly influenced by socio-economic factors and social-environmental circumstances. And although the academic literature on social determinants of health has grown comprehensively and although it points to several important social factors to be taking into account, there is a widely-shared consensus that education is a central and unavoidably key social determinant of health and wellbeing (Wilkinson and Marmot 2003; Albertsen 2015). If this is so, quality primary education is a central issue of social justice not only because of educational egalitarianism but also because of the significant importance of education for long-term health and wellbeing.

Thus, we can sum up, that primary education is a central element in a theory of social justice of any color—Rawlsian, luck egalitarian, or sufficientarian—firstly because of its great instrumental importance for improving institutional fairness by redistribution of social opportunities, for limiting the influence of arbitrary social and natural factors on the distribution of benefits in society; and secondly—as has been argued in this section—because primary education constitutes an important social determinant of health and wellbeing and is thus crucial for people's ability to follow particular life plans. Call this the two-tier argument for the importance of primary education under generic educational equality.

The importance of childhood play

If quality primary education is so important—both due to its central role in generic educational equality and its potential for being a long term social determinant of health and wellbeing—much more institutional emphasis should be put on the protection of childhood play. This is because the exercise of playful activities in childhood carries significant instrumental importance for the development of key cognitive capacities and social capabilities that is crucial for educational performance and will thus also be crucial for long term social determinants of health and wellbeing. It is too strong to suggest that a playful activity is a sufficient condition for securing the development of the needed capabilities, but the claim here is that it has a central role to play as an early life necessary condition. Childhood play should thus be conceived of as a central feature of educational justice.

Certainly, children's well-being is of central importance for non-instrumental reasons as well. A society in which children do not flourish is malfunctioning, and this puts pressure on the welfare system in general since children are more vulnerable and dependent on care than adults. Although important in its own right, my focus lies elsewhere. My emphasis is on the often-neglected instrumental value and public importance of healthy child development through childhood play. As we know today, the positive effects of child play are many and reach far out in the future. In fact, it is common to conceive of many of the developmental benefits of playful behavior as not immediate but deferred to later in development (Vygotsky 1978; Pellegrini and Smith 1989). More particularly, I am concerned here with the development of social capabilities and cognitive skills that is facilitated by childhood play. There is, however, a lurking irony in zooming in on the instrumental value of play through its development effects without taking much notice of its intrinsic value. Many of its future benefits are depending on play already being valuable in and off itself for the individual child (Mouritsen 2002). I come back to this below, when I elaborate the capability for childhood play.

One dimension of the wide-ranging good effects of a playful childhood is the development of cognitive capacities. Luntley makes a convincing philosophical case for this in a recent study (Luntley 2018). In a nutshell, his argument is that to be a learner, you must first be a player, because childhood play is a fundamental prerequisite for many forms of learning. Luntley stresses that the cognitive ability to explore and understand new patterns of learning (semantic or otherwise) is built upon and trained through play capability, its imagination and creativity.

Much support to Luntley's argument can be found in empirical studies. Many scholars of child psychology and mental development link the acquirement of cognitive skills to playful activities of playing at a young age. Empirical studies show that childhood play contributes to verbalization and to the ability to understand other's use of language (Weisberg et al. 2015; Hughes 1999), the development of concentration and management of impulses and curiosity (Bedrova and Leong 2003). Moreover, educational studies suggest that if compulsory assignments are performed as unstructured playful activities, it enhances children's creativity and imagination (Howard-Jones, Taylor and Sutton 2002). These are all crucial capacities for educational purposes. This leads to the conclusion that playful functioning is instrumentally fruitful and necessary for the development of a good educational potential. In addition, childhood playful activities are not only a powerful way to ensure development of certain cognitive skills, which are necessary for educational potential. Playful functioning is also instrumentally important for children's educational performance during their school time. From educational studies, we know that children are better able to learn in a classroom setting when routinely given recess and opportunity to engage in playful activities (Barros, Silver and Stein 2009; Bjorklund and Brown; Burdette and Whitaker 2005). What the empirical literature points to is that young children's cognitive skills and educational potential is highly influenced by their ability to engage in playful activities.

Thus, on the one hand, if effective opportunity to take advantage of educational resources is influenced by and qualified through childhood play, the generic account of educational equality will imply that we protect childhood play for reasons of educational justice. Moreover, on the other hand, if educational performance is important for long-term health and well-being—as assumed by the social determinants of health premise—this educational justice gives us a separate but equally strong reason to protect children’s opportunity for a playful childhood in school as well as before their school years. Together these two lines of empirical results support the same necessary connection between childhood play and educational performance which point collectively towards the importance of the protection of childhood play under educational justice.

Childhood play also has other parallel instrumentally valuable aspects. The interaction with other children through the practice of playing has a major impact on the individual child’s development of certain social skills that are essentially important for their ability to participate in social life. Studies within child-psychology and pediatrics show that playful activities develop children’s empathetic emotional skills; perspective talking skills; the ability to cooperate and share; and understand the essentials of group formation (McElwain and Volling 2005; Pellegrini and Smith 1998; Ginsburg 2007; Hurwitz 2002). These skills are crucial for being able to understand social norms in a communal context and therefore for a person’s capability for belonging. Through playful activities children discover social norms and rules, when to follow and when to break them (Lindsey and Colwell 2003; Gray 2011; Mainella, Agate, and Clark 2011; Bailey 2002). This practice of key social skills through playful activities is widely necessary for the development of a safe environment for social inclusion and affiliation in the long run. Thus, like childhood play is a key requisite for educational performance, it is also a necessary condition for the securement of individuals’ long term ability to establish social affiliation and inclusion.

All these empirical studies provide strong support to the conclusion that a healthy playful childhood is of central importance to the development of necessary cognitive capacities as well as social capabilities crucial for a flourishing social childhood. This grounds my conclusion, that childhood play is a central component of generic educational equality and thus ought to be considered a general requirement of educational justice.

Play and social equality

At this point, I have argued that childhood play is a central prerequisite for educational performance and a long-term social determinant of health and wellbeing and for this reason it should be granted a high status as enforceable duty of educational justice. If that argument is sound, it gives us reasons to stress that our social institutions have a duty to protect childhood play and promote certain developmental playful activities in childhood. But enlightened by recent social science research on the complex intertwinement of different forms of social inequalities, the implication of this argument seems to have an even wider scope. This is so because the cognitive and social capacities that is developed through play and which grounds the importance of play for educational performance—educational performance and social affiliation—are identified at the center of clusters of social disadvantage. In other words, whenever inequality is found to cluster together over several dimensions of social disadvantage, education and social affiliation is always identified central to those clusters. And hence, enhancing playful capabilities has strong positive impact on people's ability to cope with disadvantage. Consequently, the protection of childhood play seems to take a key role in the general societal duty to reduce social inequality. Let me unfold this argument.

Political and social science has always been largely concerned with the aim of reducing social inequality. However, whereas social inequality has traditionally been understood in terms of wealth-based inequality, recent political science research has revealed

the complexity and multidimensional scope of the issue (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Marmot 2004). One key insight is that of the very influential work of Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit on clusters of social disadvantage (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007). Concurring with the already mentioned social determinants of health literature, Wolff and de-Shalit investigate the interplay between different forms of social disadvantage, and argue that the general social science landscape paints a picture of social inequality as clusters of disadvantage such as of bad health, lack of education, low income, and unemployment. This result is confirmed by other social inequality studies such as Michael Marmot's well-known analysis of how health is related to social standing (Marmot 2004), and most recently Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *Spirit Level* emphasizing how material inequality intertwines with "how we relate to each other" (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010: 5).

But what is particular novel about Wolff and de-Shalit's study, and of particular interest to my argument here, is the importance it gives to specific "fertile functionings", which take central place in the clusters, because of their ability to have very positive spill-over effects on other dimensions. That is, through the protection and empowerment of such fertile functionings, we can bolster people's ability to overcome other social disadvantages and thereby work against the general pattern of social inequality. In reviewing the most central literature on the relationship between different capabilities, Wolff and de-Shalit conclude that the social capabilities for social inclusion and affiliation, as well as the cognitive capacities for educational performance are the most centrally fertile functionings (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007). This is so because they hold the strongest candidacy for spreading the individual empowerment gained on that particular dimension to other social dimensions and thus broadening the strength to tackle social disadvantage.

The new insights from the social inequality literature's clustering analyses, and especially Wolff and de-Shalit's emphasis on the importance of fertile functionings, add a

new and very important dimension to the social justice argument. If the analysis is correct, and thus social capabilities for affiliation and cognitive capacities for educational performance take central stage in the reduction of the negative effects of clusters of disadvantage, we have strong political reasons to enhance these particular capabilities under the general political aim of reducing social inequality. But this implies that, not only is childhood play politically important due to its influence on education and social determinant of health; it is also especially important through its impact on people's capabilities for coping with social disadvantages. In other words, what an appropriate system for healthy and creatively developing childhood play can do is not merely to enhance educational performance and secure a more appropriate distribution of social determinants of health and wellbeing, it may also plainly protect against social inequality (Nielsen 2018). This, importantly, provides us with a separate and hence additional reason to employ the social institutional system in the protection of childhood play.

The capability for childhood play

If what I have argued so far is correct, and my assumption grounded in contractualist liberal egalitarianism is accepted, we can conclude that the protection of childhood play is a central enforceable duty of distributive justice for the following three reasons. First, childhood play is a prerequisite for and part of educational capabilities and primary education is a necessary part of institutional distributive justice. Second, childhood play is through both its influence on education and social capacities a central long-term social determinant of health and wellbeing, which should be appropriately distributed under fair equality of opportunity. Third, childhood play is important for the development of social skills that have positive impact on clusters of social inequality, and hence childhood play is directly instrumentally

important for the protection of social equality. This, however, tells us very little about what to do. How to secure childhood play is a question still to be addressed.

This question calls for further discussions on how to design the right environment for childhood play. Childhood play comes in innumerable different shapes and colors—not all of them equally beneficial for development—and are inevitably characterized by contextual improvisation, and the phenomenon of valuable play is therefore impossible to pin down. For this reason, according to Mouritsen, it is more accurate to conceive of play not as a tool for education, but as a *culture* in which children flourish and develop themselves (Mouritsen 2002). It can be helpful here to see a link to the tradition owed to Sutton-Smith’s conception of play as a state of being, or a mode of identity, created out of the particular social and cultural context of the child, rather than as a predefined set of activities (Sutton-Smith 1997; James 1998). What it is, essentially, to be engaged in “playing” on this account is then not so much to perform certain activities—such as stacking building blocks or putting a dress on a doll—as it is to create a mode in which to form one’s own being in a specific context. Similarly, play culture, on Mouritsen’s account, “does not exist in a fixed form, i.e. as a product, but comes into existence through the children’s production in situations.” (Mouritsen 2002: 23). Children need an environment in which they are free to participate in and practice this production, whatever it’s situation-dependent expression, and in which they are prepared to react to the production and practices by others. What we are looking for if we wish to include play in an egalitarian account of educational justice is therefore not a list of certain playful activities, but rather a capability space within which children are effectively free to develop themselves through engagement in playful activities on their own initiative.

Within the writings on the capability approach, the distinction between capability and functioning is central. Where functioning is defined as the achievement of a state of being or doing—such as eating or being nourished—a capability is a person’s effective freedom to

achieve valuable functionings—such as being free to choose to eat (Sen 1992; Nussbaum 2000: 87; Robeyns 2005; 2011; 2017). Most capability-functioning relations appear as being separate value aspects. Recognizing this, Sen originally distinguished between wellbeing-achievement and wellbeing-freedom as two distinct values (Sen 1992: 60). To exemplify, one can achieve the value of the functioning of nourishment without effectively being capable of nourishing oneself. And whereas capability theorists find capability, not functioning, the most fundamental value, it is standard in capability writings to emphasize the priority of functionings over capabilities when it comes to children—although, typically for the sake of developing adulthood capability (Nussbaum 2000: 90). With play, this is not so straightforwardly the case. One cannot achieve the functioning of play without, to some extent, the capability to play. Of course, you can imagine a child being forced or driven into some form of activity that we would normally perceive as play (below I provide a couple of examples), but then the element of coercion would effectively prevent this behavior from being authentic play. Here, the capability perspective on play underlines the importance of the element of deliberate participation which also expressed in Mouritsen’s conception of play culture, which he argues, “is fundamentally dependent on the children’s participation and activity” (Mouritsen 2002: 23). Thus, with play it seems that the functioning and the capability are inevitably intertwined.

The importance of play for justice has occasionally been acknowledged from within the capability approach. Martha Nussbaum, most notably, includes “play” on her list of ten central human capabilities expressed as “being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities” (Nussbaum 2000: 80; 2006: 77). Nussbaum’s list is served for adult life more than for childhood and importantly adults similarly need freedom to recreate, but Nussbaum is well aware of the immense importance of play for children particularly. Nussbaum’s inclusion of play on her list has been met with some skepticism when it comes to adults², but

for children it is less controversial. Play is often considered an intrinsic childhood good (Gheaus 2015; Ferracioli 2019), and the right to play is also acknowledged by the UN convention on the rights of the child. The description of play for Nussbaum is not far from the terminology of rights employed by the UN, but as Nussbaum argues in concert with Sen, the capability approach holds more depth and precision than any account of rights, since what is needed is not merely a political arrangement for the protection of some negative liberties but also a pre-political affirmative task to secure the potential for effective realization of certain valuable human activities (Nussbaum 2006: 286-287). For this reason, as well as for capturing the complex intertwinement of intrinsic and instrumental value-aspects of play, our aim of including play in a reasonable account of educational justice seems more auspicious if based on the capability approach than on an account of human rights.

Nussbaum justifies the need for including play on her list of capabilities in the following passage.

We may suppose that children naturally play and express themselves imaginatively in play. This, however, is not precisely true. In many cultures, little girls never get encouragement to play, and in consequence they really don't know how to play. Kept inside for fear of either danger or impurity, made to do housework, these girls become like old women before they are even young women. Little boys are encouraged to be physically and mentally adventurous; they run around and explore their environment with games and schemes. This kind of human development is simply not available to many girls. In many good educational projects that work with such girls, therefore, a great emphasis is placed on games and play, which are seen as at least as important to human development as literacy and skills (Nussbaum 2000: 90-91).

Now certainly, what Nussbaum has in mind here are girls living under harsh circumstances, deprived of many of the goods that any dignified childhood naturally entails, but we can employ her illustration more generally. A capability is always the effective freedom to achieve certain valuable functionings, so when play is the functioning in question what we are searching for is the effective freedom for children to engage in valuable playful activities. I shall break this down into three necessary conditions for the capability for childhood play: (i) *an adequately wide opportunity space for play*, (ii) *play integrity*, and (iii) *secure and supportive environmental conditions*.

First, to facilitate childhood play capability, we must secure an adequately wide opportunity space for child play. In Mouritsen's account of play culture, the opportunity space is highlighted as a supra-individual cultural space that can "function as a store that is available to the current users" (Mouritsen 2002: 23). The absence of a good enough opportunity space is certainly one aspect that strikes us as problematic in Nussbaum's example. Nussbaum's metaphor of the girls becoming old women before they are even young women hinges on that they are in fact kept out of this opportunity space. Forced to do adult work for the sake of their family's bare subsistence they are deprived the effective opportunity to play. But how do we get from this picture of play deprivation to claiming the entitlement of a wide opportunity space? We do so, because of the multifarious outlook of child-play activities. As mentioned, childhood play comes in many different forms and shapes and all with slightly different developmental outcome. It is standard in the literature on play to think of playful activities as a family-resemblance construct including *object-centered play* such as playing with building blocks; *fantasy-centered play* such as pretend games and role-play; *physical play* such as climbing or dancing; and *social play* such as sports or rule-centered games (Pellegrini and Smith 1998). These different types of play can

then again be outlined in different ways and they play different roles during particular stages of childhood. For example, fantasy-centered play peaks in kindergarten—where it accounts for roughly a third of children’s play behavior—and then declines (Fein 1981).

How to shuffle the deck of different forms of play into a particular child’s life is impossible to say in general terms. We could, in principle, imagine there being an ideal play-program for every individual child based on some measure of developmental cost-benefit, but in practice this is unfeasible. Children are particular individuals with specific individual needs, and the best fit between individual child and play behavior depends on various particulars. In addition, play is always situation-dependent and often involves an element of improvisation. Mouritsen metaphorically compares the good “player” to an experienced dancer to underline the central feature of practiced spontaneity: “What the good dancers “know” is not just the steps and the songs, but how to make them swing and at the same time how to organize the dance as it progresses” (Mouritsen 2002: 24). As the same element of spontaneity is required in play culture, there cannot be an ideal blueprint of valuable play.

Moreover, the relation between capability and opportunity is a pattern of sufficiency, not maximization or perfect equality. As both Sen and Nussbaum convincingly argued, capability requires that one can choose from a sufficiently good opportunity set, not necessary that one is entitled to the maximally beneficial outcome or what opportunities others have (Sen 1992: 40-41; Nussbaum 2000: 70-71). What is important, then, is that children become familiar with the different general types of play and have the effective opportunity to engage in them. This could in some cases involve for adults to gently nudge a child to engage in play activities that she would not choose for herself, in the interest of widening the child’s future play opportunity space. But as we shall see below, there is always a balance here to be made with play integrity, since it is similarly crucial for children’s play capability that they endorse the activity that they engage in. Some children, for example, are

less inclined to take part in social play than others. Without knowing the particulars about the individual child—such as the reason why she is reluctant to participate—it is impossible to judge how much she should be pushed into participation. But it is beyond any doubt that children who lead lives in isolation, kept away from other children with the consequence of not knowing how to engage in social play, is not experiencing an adequately wide opportunity space for play and is therefore deprived the capability for childhood play in the relevant sense.

Second, play integrity is necessary for any activity to count as authentic play. Integrity here refers to playing intentionally and with active endorsement of the activity as play. This involves that the child appreciates the activity for its own sake and endorses the role she is playing in the activity. “Play culture”, Mouritsen writes, “is a medium which enables children to “cultivate” themselves” (Mouritsen 2002: 24). To exemplify, suppose a group of children are playing space travelers in the back yard imagining they have just landed a space craft on a distant planet. Their mission is to get past the terrace, into the kitchen and reach the juice boxes in the fridge without being seen. An older brother is in the kitchen minding his own business, completely unaware of his younger siblings. But in fact, he is taking the leading character as the vicious space monster from which the others are hiding. Despite him not realizing it, his role is crucial. Had he not been there, the fantastic scenario would have been little fun. But as things are, it would be wrong to say that he, the older brother, is playing. The reason for this is that he is not intentionally participating. For the same reason he is not actively endorsing his role. For him it is simply not play.

Imagine as another example, a group of children about to start a game of softball in the park. However, in order to play actual softball, the group needs an additional fielder, so they invite in another child who just happened to be in the park at the time. Now, this particular child despises softball but understands the need for the extra player, so for reasons

of solidarity, he accepts the invitation to play. Now, since this child is just as skilled a softball player as any other, from the outside it will appear as if he is similarly playing along, but informed by this account of play capability, this engagement in the game will not count as authentic play, since he is not actively endorsing his participation. Although in the typical use of the term, he is “playing” softball, it is plausible to say that it is not “play” on his part. The reason for this, arguably, is the absence of play integrity.

Now, these two examples are both benign cases of non-play, since none of them involves someone taking part against their will. Certainly, many other examples of violations of play integrity could be given with children taking part in some activity against their will—such as bullying types of games; playground “cooties” games etc.—but in such cases it is much more obvious that the activities are not play for the victims, and the examples provided above suffice to underline the important facilitating role of play integrity for an activity to count as an act of authentic play. This does not imply that the children in the examples are deprived the capability for childhood play in general terms. The cases merely serve to show that play integrity is necessary for an activity to be authentic play. Thus, the account of the capability for childhood play should secure children the effective freedom to engage, with integrity, in playful activities.

Sometimes it is hard to tell if a specific activity is a form of play or not. The act of cleaning up after some hours of intensive play is rarely considered part of the act of play by the children in question. But if one child says, “hey, let’s turn this into a game by counting how many toys we can throw into the box before we miss”, a play suddenly emerges. The play integrity condition explains why. As noted by Pellegrini and Smith, play behavior has no specific purpose. In their words, “behaviors are often classified as play if they appear to have no immediate benefit to the actor” (Pellegrini and Smith 1998: 53). In the cleaning-up scenario, the children’s behavior changes from non-play to play as this non-purpose

appreciation appears. What before had a certain purpose as its value has now become a value on its own. More generally, the activity goes from merely being instrumental—as to finish the task of cleaning up—to being intrinsically endorsed for its own sake and hence performed with play integrity. What was before an act of being told what to do has now become free play—and activity on the children’s own initiative. For any authentic form of play, it must be the case that the child is playing intentionally and is actively appreciating this particular state of being for what it is. This nicely captures play integrity as a necessary condition for play capability.³

Under the frame of play capability, the opportunity space condition and the play integrity condition complement each other. With a too restricted opportunity space, play integrity will in practice be impossible to uphold. Similarly, if play integrity is repeatedly compromised, the opportunity space will be of little use. It seems, then, that these two first aspects work nicely in concert as complementary necessary conditions for play capability.

Third and finally, the capability for childhood play needs a secure and supportive environment. Many children face gravely destitute circumstances and are therefore deprived the capability to play. The girls in Nussbaum’s example is an example, but we may also think of children living in severe poverty, or the many children around the world spending their childhoods in refugee camps with hard restrictions on playful activities. One immediate rejoinder to this would be that children often play anyway, against all odds, and even when living under the extremely harsh circumstances, because it is in the nature of children to always find a way to play.⁴ In a way, this is what Nussbaum’s case is meant to show is not always the case. Sometimes children are really deprived the mere opportunity to play. In such cases, as I have argued, the opportunity space for play is too restrictive and play integrity will over time be threatened. Moreover, and more importantly here, even when children do find a way to play under harsh circumstances, it is plausible to object that they are still deprived the

capability to play in relevant terms. One reason for this is arguably the absence of carefreeness—it is of central importance for authentic childhood play that it is performed in the carefreeness of childhood. According to Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, “[C]hildhood is a period during which it is possible to enjoy being carefree, and not to have to bear responsibility for decisions about others or, to a considerable extent, one’s own interaction with the world” (Brighouse and Swift 2014: 69).

Roberto Benigni’s 1997 drama, *La vita è bella*, provides a useful example. In the film, the lead character Guido Orefice goes through immense trouble to protect his son from the grave horrors of being kept in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. Using his fertile imagination, he succeeds in convincing his son that the whole scenario is a game. What Guido is so cleverly trying to achieve is that his son, already being bereft his freedom, is not also deprived of the carefreeness of his childhood. This element of carefreeness is constitutive of children’s capability to play, and poverty, deprivation, destitution, or similar harsh circumstances will hamper the carefreeness aspect of the capability even when it does not directly prevent children from playful functioning.⁵ Thus, secure and supportive environmental conditions is a necessary condition for children’s play capability.

I can now conclude upon my account that to secure children the capability for play, a society must: (i) present them with an adequately wide opportunity space for engaging in different types of playful activities in order to facilitate children’s development from various forms of play; (ii) protect play integrity for children in interest of the achievement of authentic play functioning; (iii) provide a secure and supportive environment for play that offers children the carefreeness of childhoods. These are, as I have argued, the foundations of the capability for childhood play, and hence what we owe our children on an egalitarian account of educational justice.

What this implies in terms of specific social institutional arrangements cannot be analyzed from here but is something to be determined informed by the cultural and contextual settings (James 1998). What we can settle here—as far as capability theory can take us—is that in designing such social institutional arrangements, we must take careful stock of potential *conversion factors* on the capability for play—i.e., the relevant factors of influence on the degree to which a person can convert a resource (broadly conceived) into a functioning (Sen 1992: 29). It is often useful to distinguish between different forms of conversion factors. For instance, my capability to play tennis is influenced by *personal conversion factors* such as my physical health and movability, *social conversion factors* such as social norms and rules about the legitimacy and social appropriateness of tennis, and *environmental conversion factors* such as there being tennis courts within my reach (Robeyns 2005).

Regarding play, it is necessary to evaluate the presence and impact of conversion factors as they may have significant impact on children’s capabilities. First, health is a crucial personal conversion factor. Physical disabilities will certainly limit the possibilities of children to engage in some forms of playful activities, but what is less obvious is the crucial impact of children’s mental health on their opportunity to be included in the social life of childhood play.⁶ It is also crucial that in regards to medical treatment of children, the health care system must be sensitive to the importance of not excluding children from their natural play environment. Second, primary schools lay ground to the construction of both social and environmental conversion factors on children’s capability to play. It is of central importance, therefore, that school-life is designed so as to facilitate a healthy play-environment.

Much more needs to be addressed in order to say anything definite about how to target the social harm of inequality in health and wellbeing. What I have given here is an argument for why it is demanding, under the heading of liberal egalitarianism, to emphasize the importance of childhood play and that this implies protecting children’s capability for

childhood play by facilitating an educational environment in which authentic childhood play can develop and flourish.

Conclusion

I draw the following conclusions from my argument in this paper. First, quality primary education is an entitlement of justice under generic educational equality. In the narrow sense, primary education holds immense importance for levelling the playing field in regard to competition for offices and positions in society. In the wider sense, primary education should moreover be granted normative importance because it secures a more equal allocation of opportunities for following reasonable individual life-plans. Second, if quality primary education is an entitlement of distributive justice, then any just institutional education system ought to protect childhood play because it holds central instrumental importance for educational performance, for social integration and affiliation, and lastly—through the two former effects—for protection against social inequality and disadvantage. And finally, any social institution that aims to protect or enhance childhood play should focus on children's capability to play rather than play functioning, because no form of play can be authentic if it is not performed out of an effective capability. One direct implication of this argument is that educational institutions should be sensitive to pressing conversion factors on children's capability to play—such as health, social environment and primary school settings—and seek to implement social and political initiatives designed to diminish the negative effects of such conversion factors. Thus, I conclude, if teaching is something we owe our children, then we ought to teach them the capability to play.

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Notes

¹ The issue of unequal parental upbringing—which, I should add, propose a hard dilemma for all educational egalitarians—has given rise to a heated debate separating Rawlsians from luck egalitarians on the issue of the injustice in reading bedtime stories for children (Swift 2003; Segall 2013; 2011; Mason 2011; Brighthouse and Swift 2014).

² See Claassen and Duwell 2013.

³ Poul Bou-Habib and Serena Olsaretti (2014) provides an argument for the importance of autonomy in childhood that could serve to support the importance of play integrity in childhood in its own terms..

⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to consider this question.

⁵ For an argument for the constitute role of carefreeness for child wellbeing, see Ferracioli 2019.

⁶ See Sing 2008 and American Psychiatric Association (1994).