

## A Pedagogy of Connection: The Place of Play

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This paper emerges from a research project entitled *'Partners in Play: How children organise their participation in social pretend play'* (Brennan, 2007), an ethnographic, interpretive study designed to explicate how children develop shared activity and meaning in play. The data was collected in a preschool playgroup over nine months and consists of 196 documented (with video) play episodes.

The research is located within a sociocultural perspective and proposes (1) that all learning is mediated by culture and (2) that children, through a process of collective interpretation and reconstruction, appropriate cultural ways of knowing and create collective understandings about discourses and practices that frame their lives together. How do children organise joint participation in play? How do they negotiate shared understanding of cultural values, roles, relationships and identities? The paper addresses these questions and draws on the research data (including video) to demonstrate the processes involved.

The research has implications for the development of learning environments, at the physical, organisational and pedagogical level. The analysis demonstrates the role of play in children's learning and indicates the critical need to balance the individual basis of the traditional pedagogical approach with a pedagogy of connection, so that children (and adults) are empowered to contribute to the construction of knowledge.

### Theory and Methodology Background

What Piaget (Piaget, 1937/71) sees as individual constructions emerging from the internal cognitive structures of the child, Vygotsky (1978) sees as, first and foremost, social constructions, subsequently internalised by the child. Post-Vygotskians (Rogoff, 1990; Cole, 1996) argue that the intermental and internal processes are concurrent and reciprocal. The individual and the social are in ongoing transaction. In the interaction moments, children interpret, reconstruct and internalise the intended and unintended lessons in how the world works: physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively. This appropriation process not only communicates meaning but provides the tools for the ongoing reconstruction and implementation of meaning and practice to meet the needs of changing groups and goals. Working with this perspective, the research views children as social agents with an innate drive to learn a culture and to share thinking with others (Stern, 1977; Trevarthen, 1998) and aims to focus on children as they appropriate from the adult world (1) the system of social relationships and interactions and (2) the cultural conceptual and symbolic system (Nicolopoulou, 1993).

Sociodramatic play is a context and medium for exercising these drives, providing both motivation and opportunity to repeatedly reconstruct concepts, practices and relationships. Children bring their interpretations of the real world to their play and then the combination of pretence and exaggeration works to make their practices and meaning more explicit both for themselves and for the observer. Coordinating their contributions to create play stories involves adjustment and shared reconstruction of meaning. Transferring to new and varied pretend contexts and renegotiating with play partners is a learning process, involving moments of conflict and practical consciousness, when children struggle to accommodate and contribute to new meaning and demands.

The methodological approach follows logically from the aim and theoretical perspective. Interpretive ethnography involves the study of the experiences, perspectives and actions of the research subjects in natural situations and treats the perspectives and actions as socially grounded both within the immediate contexts in which people live and work and within the wider framework of the society. The meaning created between people is not objective and is always open to subjective interpretation. The analysis offered here is largely the subjective interpretation of the researcher and dependent for validation on (1) rich description that locates activity within social goals and relationships (2) a prolonged period of time spent in the research setting that allowed the researcher to become familiar with the community and (3) triangulation supports such as participant observation, fieldnotes, video recordings, interviews and checking with children and staff and consultation with expert advisory groups. In the end, the research offers a particular perspective and the aim is to persuade the reader of the validity of that perspective. The evidence presented here is representative of extensive data collected (with the permission of children, parents and staff) over the academic year.

This paper proposes to examine data collected (Brennan, 2007) to analyse the children's play to (1) demonstrate the process of appropriation (2) identify the interactional strategies involved and (3) consider the outcomes. It begins with an analysis of a play episode to explicate the cultural knowledge, complex goals and interactional strategies that contribute to the play development and to demonstrate key moments of appropriation. It then briefly reviews the data to explore the outcomes of appropriation in terms of children's conception and practice of gender differentiation.

### ***'The Kiss': Summary***

In this play episode, Liam and Greg first opt to be workers and then 'Daddies', so that they can engage with Susan and Trudi as their two daughters. In the emerging play narrative, the two Daddies go to work leaving their daughters in bed. James intrudes on the play and is delegated the role of 'kid'. He is disruptive, steals a father's phone and has to be managed. Other children tease and look for a chase. The fathers return and Greg greets his sleeping daughter with a kiss, a source of embarrassment to Liam. Susan moves into

housekeeping mode but Greg retains his fatherly power by giving directives and gifts. He then decides that he wants to stay in the homecorner and play with Susan so he changes, against Liam's wishes, to a 'brother' role. Subsequently, Susan becomes a robber who steals Greg's phone.

### Common Frames and Emergent Play Stories

Common previous experience and shared patterns of play frame the play episode. 'Daddies going to work' is a regular play theme, as is shopping and domestic work. Such themes are facilitated by the children's common experience of home and parental work, the history of such play themes in the setting and the various combinations and permutations of players who engage. The play narrative, however, remains unpredictable because each enactment deals with changed circumstances, unexpected intrusions and contributions and consequent changed dynamics. Here, the children the workers meet on route, the play entry bid of James, the sub-clauses initiated by the phone theft and the partnership between Greg and Susan bring this play episode in new directions. The theme of 'robber' arises, for example, and in retrospect we can connect it to the central position of mobile phones in the drama because of James's ad hoc entry and theft. Each play episode, while sharing similar frames, brings new developments and demands new responses.

### Complex Goals

As in real life, there are many concurrent plots and goals, and intersecting narratives. Trudi and Susan are in conflict because Trudi resents Susan and Greg playing together and is threatening to withdraw her friendship. This recurring conflict often fragments the play. On this occasion it remains a sub plot. James and other recruits are interested in a game of chasing. Liam wants to foreground his play partnership with Greg whereas Greg is more interested in playing with Susan. Play agendas, friendship agendas and power agendas compete for prominence. The children need to manage the complex goals and sub plots to develop a collaborative and coherent play theme.

The following is a short excerpt from the 40 minute episode:

Greg and Liam, the two Daddies, are building a wall. 'Kids don't come to work...go back home', they tell James. James brandishes a phone that Liam claims to own. He asks Greg to retrieve it.

Liam to Greg     *Get my phone off him*

Greg tries briefly and then takes Liam by the arm:

Greg             *I'll buy you a new phone...*

They return home. The two daughters are in bed.

Greg             *You kiss Trudi, OK?*

Greg kisses Susan. Liam refuses, covers his face in embarrassment and then catches Greg's eye. Greg is very embarrassed. He shouts at the girls to save face.

Greg                    *Wake up you smellies.... Wake up...Wake up...Wake up, you deadheads*  
Susan, in a shy baby voice, tells him about her 'blankey'.

Susan                *I'm going shopping*

Greg to Susan      *Here's slippers, Darling...I'll show you how they fit*

### **Cultural Knowledge**

In their play, the children give us many clues about their families and community. They have already appropriated a common cultural framework that now guides their meaning-making and allows them to produce recognisable initiatives at action, verbal and emotional level appropriate to their roles. They are familiar with beds, cookers, microwaves, dishwashers and mobile phones. Within their roles, the children interpret and reconstruct discourses of work and gender and power. The fathers go to work and present as both powerful and caring. The pretend children don't go to work. They co-construct themselves as less knowledgeable and in need of control and direction.

The children demonstrate their awareness that body and verbal language convey status. Greg struts as the worker while Susan shrinks and giggles as the child. Status, for them, is further identified by such tangible features as clothes, tools, money and responsibilities. Mobile phones carry status and recognising technical and style features is important cultural knowledge in this community. These are concepts, practices and discourses that are abstracted from real life and recontextualised in the play narrative. The children may not consciously reflect on their behaviours but thinking and feeling in action is accompanied by shifts in consciousness and practice.

### **Cultural Discourses**

The children recognise that there are social discourses which afford and constrain the agency of particular persons or categories of persons in social contexts. '*Kids don't come to work - go back home*' is an attempt to pull into line someone who has stepped outside the accepted discourse.

Crossing the threshold of acceptable behaviour, as when Greg kisses Susan, instigates a moment of conflict and momentarily suspends the play frame. The limits of pretence are overstretched and the children are conscious of transgression. Liam and Greg both show their embarrassment. Greg's social alertness allows him to tune in. He notes Liam's hand covering his eyes and he reads his disapproval. The interaction is part of the developing discourse of gendered behaviour within this group, an interpretation from the adult world and reconstructed here. It is an interpretation made public, even to the children themselves, maybe for the first time. In the interaction moment between Greg and Liam,

mediated by strong cultural messages, they negotiate the cultural meaning of such a kiss and in the same moment they internalise lessons about acceptable behaviour. Here is the foundation of both morality and social regulation. Greg is shamed by his faux pas, a strong emotional reaction that will ensure that he does not repeat the mistake. He immediately projects himself back into the public arena, where he instinctively knows that identity is created, to correct the identity misconstruction. He re-establishes his masculinity by roughly shouting at the girls, calling them 'smellies' and giving them further directives. These moments of crisis in the play instigate conscious adjustment and transformation.

### **Interactive Skills**

How do these children connect on the intermental plane? Use of artefacts, clear actions and naming their initiatives with '*Pretend we're workers*' '*We're the Daddies*' '*The kid's gone with the phone*' are devices for making their intentions legible and open to response. Demonstrating initiatives in this way serves, often unintentionally, as a way of self registration and as a way of connecting with others. It links others into their thinking and intentions and makes them predictable. Play partners must be able to read social cues. Then they can respond by following and extending the initiative. The more easily intentions can be read through action, verbal and emotional expression, the easier the collaboration (Aarts, 2000). Communicating initiatives clearly allows children to establish common ground, to coordinate their activities and to be agentive with further initiatives. These are the elements of intersubjectivity identified by Matusov (2001).

### **Collective Appropriation**

The data in this research shows that children want both to register themselves as intentional and powerful individuals and, as Corsaro (2003) found, to share their world with others. The challenge, constantly presented in the data, is to manage a balance between the two. Participation requires both individual agency and group cooperation. Children do not necessarily fully understand or empathise with one another's contribution. They contribute to the collective flow and in the process build a cultural framework that is a 'heteroglossia' or blending of voices (Sawyer, 1997), which has a binding effect psychologically and behaviourally on the participants. This does not mean that every individual behaves or thinks in the same way but that they live within a collectively constructed framework. Through this process of co-ordinating their interpretations and contributions, children reconstruct the cultural relational and conceptual system. They reconstruct, for example, the roles and relationships of boys and girls. Within this research data, Lydia tells Alice that the spectacles she chooses are only for boys; Kylie is embarrassed to be caught wearing a builder's hat; Terri designates the homecorner as a female-only zone. The boys teach one another how to be masculine in the roles of workers, Power Rangers and pirates. Greg, who kisses his daughter in the episode described above, six months later, berates Stephen for being a hairdresser, saying: '*That's*

*for girls, you idiot*". Stephen learns to attune to the gender discourse. These children are transformed by the discourses and practices that they collaboratively appropriate.

### **Conclusion**

This research identifies the process of appropriation in play and demonstrates that appropriation is a transaction with other people in the community and consequently particular to that community. Children want to belong and therefore they are keen to be skilful in the ways that are recognised and valued among significant people in their lives. To understand children's knowledge construction, we must understand these values and practices. This can be challenging for pedagogues whose cultural framework is very different to that of the children they work with. It requires that we develop close links with families and communities.

The research foregrounds learning in social interaction towards cultural goals. It is a perspective that involves a shift from the traditional Piagetian view of the child as lone scientist to understanding the collective, intermental nature of knowing. The perspective centralises the child's need to connect with others and the critical importance of interactive skills, cultural knowledge and cultural goals as both the medium and outcome of learning. The pedagogue's principle role becomes helping children to connect, to communicate and to belong, supporting them in the interactive moments when these skills and identities are constructed. Helping children to communicate their initiatives at action, verbal and emotional level (Aarts 2000), to read and follow the cues of others and to generate trust is a starting point. With these skills and adult support children gain access to the construction of cultural knowledge and goals and ways of thinking. Sociodramatic play offers both a rich context and medium for this learning. The research consequently re-values and re-centralises the role of play in an early childhood curriculum that focuses on connecting on the intermental plane.

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