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When Small Children Play: how adults dramatise and children create meaning

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ABSTRACT *A description of the way in which children's play develops is often based on children's physical environment. Another standard assumption is that small children progress from playing with objects to taking part in role-play. This study focuses on the cultural aspect of play and its aim is to investigate how small children create meaning in their play in dialogue with adults. The study is an educational experiment in which the pedagogic process is staged, followed and analysed.*

The theme 'Deep in the Nooks and Crannies' was tested in two classes for toddlers at a preschool in Karlstad. The inspiration came from several well-known Swedish children's books. The result shows that the cultural context has a positive influence on children's quest for meaningful action. A child's imagination is not captured by an object itself, but by the story which gives the object and the actions their meaning. When adults play roles and dramatise a chain of events, they open a door to a play world which the children can enter.

Keywords: *toddlers, play, drama, picture-book, story, play world*

Background

Usually, a description of the way in which children's play develops is based on the children's physical environment. It is true that small children tend to be interested in the objects that surround them, those which they can touch and manipulate. The problem, however, is that adults usually draw parallels between the actions involved in children's play and this visible manipulation of objects and consequently describe children's play in external, tangible terms instead of studying play in a social and cultural context.

Many of the psychological theories of children's play are based on a biological approach, which means that as the child matures, it develops according to a set pattern

of progression: from playing with objects the child moves on to include symbols and roles, and then finally to role-play (Piaget, 1962; Elkonin, 1988; Trageton, 1994).

The theory of natural development also brings with it a romantic notion that play is a 'free' activity, which should be protected from adult interference. In Swedish play-schools, teachers have an ambivalent attitude to play, and are uncertain about whether to interfere or not when children play. In my opinion, this is the case because Swedish play-schools have not traditionally taken a cultural, aesthetical approach to play pedagogics. On the contrary, they have adopted a traditional approach to development psychology which lacks both social and cultural contexts (Lindqvist, 1995, 1996).

In my thesis *The Aesthetics of Play* (1995), I investigated the connections between play and culture, primarily drama and literature, in order to develop some models for a creative pedagogy of play. This involved a didactic project. Together with my husband and colleague Jan Lindqvist, I introduced a play theme, *Alone in the big, wide world*, at the Hybelejen day-care centre in Karlstad (Lindqvist, 1992).

The result of my play project convinced me that small children are able to interpret complicated contexts. As it turned out, the youngest children were the first to register the underlying atmosphere of a certain situation and they also contributed greatly to keeping this alive for a long time. One example of this was when the children took part in 'the Hunt for Groke', a joint dramatisation and game which involved both children and teachers. The smallest children interpreted the situation in terms of fear and security. The young children were mainly responsible for creating the atmosphere. One of the children (3.1) sounded like Groke, and he was Groke for a long time after the hunt was over. Even the ants became a threat, which demonstrated that children are able to understand the meaning of abstract concepts such as fear/security.

The theoretical basis of the project was a cultural approach to play, which has in part been inspired by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky's theory on the close relation between play and art and the entire process through which children develop cultural awareness.

Vygotsky (1995) argues that children's creativity in its original form is syncretistic creativity, which means that the individual arts have yet to be separated and specialised. Children do not differentiate between poetry and prose, narration and drama. Children draw pictures and tell a story at the same time; they act a role and create their lines as they go along. Children rarely spend a long time completing each creation, but produce something in an instant, focusing all their emotions on what they are doing at that moment in time.

This syncretism is evidence of the single origin of all kinds of children's creativity, which have later been separated. This origin is children's play, which serves as preparation for artistic creativity (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 76, translated from Swedish).

Play creates *meaning*. Play is a dynamic meeting between a child's inner life (emotions and thoughts) and its external world. When children play, they create a fictitious situation and perform actions. Play reflects reality on a deeper level, and should not be interpreted as a realistic presentation of a certain action. Just like art, Vygotsky writes, play is a photographic negative of everyday life. When a child can create an imaginary or fictitious situation, it is also developing its ability to think in terms of abstracts. Play points in the direction of abstract thought as well as art.

While working on my thesis, I realised that children's play is based on two *aesthetic*

patterns: one is linked to poetry, music and movement and the other to literature and drama, involving role-play and actions.

Toddlers have a poetic approach to language. According to Chukovsky (1975), children are born poets who gradually learn to speak in prose. Children are generally very interested in nursery rhymes, and Chukovsky uses the ‘probable improbabilities’ featured in nursery rhymes to show how children take an interest in the absurd, in topsy-turvy situations which break up the established and orderly world. Children use the imaginary world of play to interpret reality.

Play Themes for Toddlers

In order to gain a deeper insight into how very small children develop their play, we decided to try out a play theme in two classes at the Hybelejen day-care centre (preschool) in Karlstad. In these classes, the children were between 1 and 3 years old. It was a kind of *activity research* and an *educational experiment* when you stage and follow the process. Being able to try out ideas under normal circumstances, i.e. at a regular day-care centre, was important.

I have used the following methods of studying the pedagogical process:

1. videotaping the planned dramatisations and children’s play afterwards;
2. following the general development by:
 - visiting each class regularly, keeping a journal;
 - having talks with the children and the preschool teachers;
3. reading project reports from the staff.

This theme-work has been described and analysed in a report (Lindqvist, 1997).

The Aims of the Study

How do children create meaning in play when they see adults acting roles? How do children relate to their physical surroundings and to the entire situation? What do they focus their interpretations on? Can they distinguish between imagination and reality?

What role do adults play when children develop their playing patterns? In what way is children’s play affected when adults enter the fiction and act out roles and actions? And what role does literary fiction have in children’s play?

We introduced the play theme *Deep in the nooks and crannies*, which was intended to reflect the children’s relationship (from a physical as well as a socio-cultural aspect) with the space they occupy.

This theme was inspired by two children’s books. One was the picture-book *The Story of Somebody*, jointly created by Löfgren and Möller-Nielsen (1951), who wrote the story.

Traces of ‘Somebody’ could be found all over the place. ‘Somebody’ had overturned the table with Granny’s knitting and taken off with the ball of wool. The thread wound its way over various surfaces in the room, creating a contrast to the room as it is usually perceived (Schaffer, 1991). This book has won an award.

The other literary world was inhabited by Fluff the rabbit and his friend Henry. In this book, author Ulf Löfgren strives to keep things simple, partly by reflecting the way in which children experience the world and partly by emphasising the playfulness of the characters (animals with human traits) and their actions (Löfgren, 1984a,b,c, 1994).

The Play World Emerges: the red ball of wool

The red ball of wool winds its way through the rooms. It can be traced from the bathroom, where seven children have just been spending some time with one of the teachers.

The thread swirls across the dining table in the main play room, across the teachers' coffee table and into the dolls' room. When the adults show them the red thread and comment on what seems to have happened, the children start following it. "Someone has tipped out the fruit", one teacher says. "The cups have been turned up-side-down", says another.

However, the children do not find either the thread or the unusual untidiness very interesting. Only when they find the pine-cones which have been placed on the floor do they react noticeably and start wondering who could have thrown them there.

The thread disappears into the oven of the dolls' cooker. All the children have gathered around, eager to see what will be revealed when the oven door is opened. Inside the oven is a squirrel.

"A hedgehog", one child (2.3) guesses, probably because the Swedish word for 'hedgehog' resembles that for 'cone'. "No", the teachers answer, "it is not a hedgehog, it's a ...". It takes the children quite a long time to come up with the answer: a squirrel. Afterwards three children return to the pine-cones and still wonder what has happened.

The children are obviously looking for the meaning of the thread and the squirrel. They are not generally interested in their physical surroundings, but follow in the footsteps of their teachers, who have guided them around the centre.

The adults had consciously decided to present 'the red ball of wool' in this way in order to explain the meaning of the thread, but instead, the thread only seemed to confuse the children when they tried to work out what had happened.

The Story of Somebody

The next dramatisation is based on *The Story of Somebody* (Löfgren and Möller-Nielsen, 1951). In this book, the red ball of wool plays an important part. One of the teachers reads the story while the others trail the thread as the story progresses. This time, the children pay attention both to the thread and to the storyline.

"A wet mark on the floor", the teacher reads.

"It is untidy", says one of the children (3.2), noticeably awed.

"But ... it makes a mess", says another one (2.6).

The children are beginning to look concerned. They follow the trail made by the mischievous kitten and when they finally get to the cupboard, they peer through the keyhole in the door to find out who is hiding inside. And there, hidden inside a blue vase, they find the ball of wool—and a kitten, Somebody. **He** is the one who has been up to all that mischief.

"Look, a kitten!" The children say 'hello' to the kitten and one of the girls (2.2) quickly gathers him in her arms. She puts him in the vase and then into the cupboard. Another girl (2.4) takes the cat and puts him in the vase and then into the cupboard. This game continues for a long time. Then all the children hide in the cupboard and they are very fond of the game hide-and-seek. Afterwards, most of the children go around investigating every single place which the kitten has visited and messed up.

This dramatisation is based on a story which fascinates the children and this is why they are able to understand what has happened. They notice all the little breaches of

normal order and comment on how mischievous the kitten is. The theme is so real to them that they become concerned by the untidiness and the repercussions that often follow when somebody has been naughty. They immediately want to wipe up the puddle on the floor and tidy up the rest of the mess and some of the older children are very eager to help.

This dramatisation brings a lot of the day-care centre's rules into focus, as well as the teachers' authority. The children are very aware of adult social rules and regulations, at the same time as they are uncertain about how these rules relate to their own needs. They feel threatened by the adult world. 'Somebody' the cat becomes an important playmate to most of the children, in his capacity as one who dared to oppose the authorities.

Henry and Fluff Play Guessing Games (Löfgren, 1984a,b,c)

One morning, one of the teachers sits knitting and the children instantly understand that something exciting is about to happen. They have found the red thread and start following it.

"Where does it lead to?" asks one of the adults.

The wool winds its way into the dolls' room.

"Hello there, I'm Henry."

"How did you get here?" asks one of the teachers.

"Because of a cat. I've come to pick up Somebody. I have to get Somebody for Fluff", Henry replies.

Then Henry shows them the way to Fluffsville. You can hear Fluff snoring. He is woken up by the cat, Somebody. A crown on his head turns him into King Fluff. Then he has to get dressed and, in doing so, puts his underpants on his head. He gets most things wrong and the children roar with laughter at his mistakes.

After that he has a meal and his meatballs shoot across the room. By this stage, the children are on the verge of wetting themselves with laughter. Next, Fluff and Henry start to guess riddles and rhyming and Henry tries to fool Fluff all the time, much to the children's delight.

After this dramatisation the children want to try to do all the silly things which Fluff and Henry have been doing. The air is thick with meatballs. Several children pretend to be cats on Fluff's mattress. First, all five cats lie in a row, meowing loudly, but the longer the game goes on, the wilder it gets, and before long, three of the children have turned into tigers, clawing and pawing madly.

In his description of Merleau-Ponty's ideas on the philosophy of the human body, Rasmussen (1996) claims that children's body language clearly shows that when they play, their inner and outer worlds meet and merge. There is no separation of motorics, imagination, body and mind. Children are not aware of what they wish to express. They do not think first, before they play; they think, play and use their imagination all at once.

In my opinion, these ideas about the physical expression of play are linked to the imaginary process and the aesthetic form of play. When the children pretend to be cats, they move with soft, sensuous movements. The feeling makes the movements soft, and this spirals back and reinforces the softness in the feeling. Action and role are also linked. The role of a cat is an integrated part of the action: moving like a cat. In order to speed up the action, the children start moving more vigorously, which enables them

to turn into a more dangerous animal—a tiger. The transformation in their play is thus an aesthetic process, which creates new meaning.

Children's physical expressions also reflect the way in which they experience the space which surrounds them. A room is an extension of a child's body. Children do not perceive a room as an abstract, geometric entity; they move around in *living space* (Rasmussen, 1996). According to Trageton (1977), children see the topology of a room. To them a room is, in other words, a dynamic network of places (topos) with individual qualitative qualities. A room is a world. This, says Heggstad (1994), is an aesthetic way of looking at space.

Henry and Fluff Play with the Children

The adults continue to play the roles of Henry and Fluff, and this arouses the children's interest and makes them very eager to play along.

Henry and Fluff have crawled into Henry's little home in the mattress room. The children gather around the opening, wanting to come inside. Some go and fetch coffee and squash, while the others squeeze inside.

After a while, two girls (2.5, 2.7) take care of Henry and show him around their part of the day-care centre.

“Let's go in here to play”, says one of them. “I'm going to swing.” She sits on a chair and pretends to be swinging.

“Are you pretending that it is a hammock?” asks Henry.

“There are lots of toys here”, says one of the girls when they have gone into a different section. “Look! It's Henry and Fluff”, she says and points to a picture of them. “You can play here”, the girls say to Henry.

Another child, a boy (2.5), involves Fluff in his role play. Fluff drives the car. The boy knows which teacher has played Fluff, which demonstrates his ability to distinguish between fiction and reality.

The children like playing with the adults. When the adults act out roles, the children know that they are playing and do not have to worry about 'adult conventions'. The adults show the children that they know how to play—that is to say, that they are aware of the rules of play.

Afterwards the children's parents build a Soapbox Cart (Löfgren, 1994) and the teachers and the children make several journeys in this car.

Conclusions and Discussion

This study shows that a cultural context encourages children to search for meaningful actions. New objects alone are not sufficient to capture the children's interest, but when the red thread is accompanied by a story, *The Story of Somebody*, every new object becomes interesting. Telling a story is the best way to provide children with a context and a whole new world. It is the story (text) that creates meaning for the children.

Children have an ability to sense both the feeling of a situation and the underlying themes, for example visible/invisible or obedient/disobedient—themes which also relate to two important aspects of a child's world. When they play hide-and-seek they show interest in aspects of visibility and invisibility. They deal with the ability to distinguish between reality and imagination, to separate visible things from those which only exist

in children's fantasy worlds, as well as the ability to distinguish between social rules, being obedient and having some degree of personal freedom.

Social rules are learnt at an early stage, but since it takes time to learn which rules apply and what reality looks like, children take an interest in anything which disrupts the social order. Vygotsky (1981) is of the opinion that children are social beings from the very start, and that they take an active interest in roles and dialogue. This means that the process of forming their own identities and relating to the world around them happens at a later stage. It also means that for teachers to prioritise rules and norms in a day-care centre is an exaggerated course of action. Hakkarainen (1997) writes that adults often regard daily activities from an administrative point of view and that activities are organised from an adult perspective. The children are regarded as guests who have been invited to an institution and should be taken care of. The use of time and space is planned on the basis of adult chores and norms. This includes play, which is fitted into a slot in a daily schedule.

Adults are important factors when children play. The unequivocal result of this study is that when adults dramatise roles and actions and invite the children into a play world, the children know what is play and what is not. An unbroken storyline inspires play, and this fiction is closely linked to art and culture. It is the story that creates meaning for the children, not the physical environment and the objects. Songs, stories, films and dramatisations all provide material which children can transform into play, but literary fiction has proven to be particularly well suited (Whitehead, 1997). If play is allowed to be the pivotal activity in preschools and day-care centres, *sharing* becomes a key word. Both children and adults can be inspired by the culture which surrounds them and create play together. At the same time the children's literature has invited the children into a literary world with a special atmosphere.

The theme *Deep in the nooks and crannies* was used for a full year. The children drew pictures, read stories and played with the soft toy Fluff, but the occasions they enjoyed most were those when Henry and Fluff came alive and visited the day-care centre.

"What are Henry and Fluff doing?" the teachers asked.

"They are playing", the children answered with conviction.

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