



Peer-reviewed Paper

## **Dressing up play: Rethinking play and playfulness from socio-cultural perspectives**

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*Play is complex, contradictory, and sometimes chaotic. It has been described in such contrary ways as: both work and fun, pleasurable, purposeful and also without purpose, intrinsically motivated, yet socially and biologically driven and without predetermined outcomes (Lemke, 1995). Children playing together are engaging their emotional, cognitive, physical, social, spiritual selves in ways which transcend boundaries between these traditional psychological domains. Feelings, thoughts, and bodies are connected, and may be perceived and represented aesthetically in children's play where "aesthetic experience encourages consciousness to engage in a form of reflection that does not restrict it in any way. This highly unusual experience opens up for consciousness new and previously unrealized possibilities" (Bubner, 1997, p. 169).*

### **Introduction**

Play is a vast domain and this paper will explore the relational, intersubjective, improvisational, aesthetic and collaborative qualities of young children being playful together in early childhood centre settings. These are the particular qualities observed in a study of children's playful communication (Alcock, 2006) and have important implications for how teachers of young children can plan environments and create conditions that can foster playful communication and thereby enabling learning. The wider study on which this paper is based viewed children playing as holistic combinations of social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and physical dimensions intertwined in activity. This view seems to be particularly relevant for where connectedness is an overarching theme (Lemke, 1995; Varella, Thompson and Rosch, 1991). Play functions as a sort of sticky glue connecting players with each other and the world in dynamic complex activity systems. The glue is created by the players as part of themselves, like spiders spinning webs, connecting things.

Playful behaviour is about connections: it involves relationships and relating. We are social beings and exist for each other in our relationships with each other. The tendency towards playfulness in relationships adds another dimension to ways of relating and being together. Playfulness can relax and free up thinking and feeling, thereby enabling the emergence of newness in our thoughts and feelings (Alcock, 2008). Opportunities for teachers to extend and complicate play are plentiful, but such involvement requires teacher awareness of opportunities and possibilities. This paper touches on some areas where teachers can enhance their awareness of the nature of playfulness. These areas include the connected, shared, and distributed nature of play as well as links between the arts, aesthetic experience and play.

### **The arts, rhythm and musike**

In his classic overview of play: *Homo ludens: A study of the play element in culture* Huizinga (1949) proposed that art is like play. It follows that play



shares similar qualities with the *arts*. The *arts* and aesthetic experience represent a wide range of different ways of knowing, and of representing thoughts and feelings (Grierson & Mansfield, 2003). The *arts* are cultural, communicative and social languages that involve diverse ways of representing and experiencing images and relationships. Both connect people with culture and involve symbol systems and making meaning. This line of thinking has been picked up more specifically in relation to rhythm and the arts. Thus Dissanayake (2001) argues that the rhythmic intersubjective qualities in early infant-caregiver relationships underpin the development of artistic and aesthetically creative ways of thinking and being. The temporal arts: poetry, dance, drama, and music, all involve communication and symbolic representation mediated by rhythm. These temporal arts - called *musike* by the Ancient Greeks - function as mediating artefacts that connect people communicatively. From this perspective the rhythm in play resonates, echoes, and connects with rhythm in the world.

Psychological play research has tended to view play from an individualistic outcomes perspective, emphasising possible future benefits and potential learning for individuals, but play is also social and involves children learning how to be in the present. In a sense children playing and pretending in different roles may be viewed as being extra-social because they may assume multiple personalities, pretending to be sister, baby brother, mother, father, batman, or whatever creature they choose, thereby multiplying the number of players and extending their repertoire and experience of social roles. This article presents a socio-culturally based perspective to argue that the shared, intersubjective, improvisational and aesthetic nature of young children playing together is fundamentally important for children learning about roles, place, and possibilities in a relational world.

### **Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT)**

Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) has informed both the philosophical underpinnings and the methodology used in the study on which this article is based (Alcock, 2006; Cole, 1996; Engestrom, 1999; Leont'ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Chaiklin (2001) has defined CHAT as "the study of the development of psychological functions through social participation in societally-organised practices" (p. 21). The societally-organised practices presented in this article are playful 'events' observed in early childhood centres. 'Events' in the wider study which this article draws on were the basic unit of analysis: events are artefact mediated systems of activity (Alcock, 2006). CHAT prioritises artefact mediation in communication. The CHAT focus of the wider study (Alcock, 2006) has helped shift the researcher's focus from individuals to interactions by prioritising the dynamics of artefact mediation: this illuminated the processes by which words, gestures, gaze, and other signs, symbols, and tools mediated children's shared and distributed playfulness. CHAT also prioritises the dynamics inherent in activity. Thus activity is understood as interconnecting, always changing, activity systems with multiple overlapping relationships between and across the elements of the activity. Elements include the rules, roles, community and artefacts that mediate activity (Engeström, 1999).

This researcher found CHAT useful for shifting paradigms from a more individualistic focus on children and play as separate categories to a greater awareness of the interconnectedness of children playing. The CHAT lens helped shift her observer focus from individuals to interactions by prioritising the dynamics of artefact mediation: this illuminated the processes by which material and non-material artefacts such as words, gestures and gaze, mediated children's shared and distributed playfulness.



The dynamics of artefact mediation, and related concepts around the inclusion of semiotic signs as non-material artefacts, can be challenging for those not familiar with the CHAT jargon. For example common usage of the word 'artefact' includes only material objects: it mistakenly excludes non-material signs and symbols. So awareness of the limitations of jargon is important. Models, such as CHAT, are only useful if they open and extend our ways of seeing children, rather than restricting and narrowing our views.

Activity systems, like the people and artefacts they connect, are not tidy. In this article playful events are portrayed as activity systems. Tensions and contradictions between the elements and goals of activity propel and motivate ongoing activity. Analysis involves exploring the tensions and contradictions in these relationships and play lends itself well to this sort of analysis because play abounds in contradictions. For example rules and roles may be reversed as they are turned upside down and 'played with'.

### **Play as relational pedagogy**

Children across all cultures play and from a macro-level play must be interpreted within those particular social cultural historical contexts which construct, define, and situate that play in sometimes very different ways (Goncu, 1999). Accordingly play is defined and understood in multiple ways which reflect these different contexts, cultural values, definitions and understandings. For example young children imitating their elders may be seen as playing, as pretending, and they may also be working.

From a socio-cultural and relational perspective children's social pretend play connects individuals in complex systems of activity. The intersubjective, collaborative, and distributed nature of this playfulness is mediated by children's use of rules, roles, imagination and strategies of imitation and repetition.

Pretend play includes elements of performance and theatre and is frequently dramatic so is described by Guss (2005, p. 235) as "*play-drama* – a drama performed in the cultural context of children's playing". A socio-cultural perspective of children's play drama prioritises the role of rules in this play. Children learn self-regulation by pretending to be another person or thing and must negotiate the rules of the play to fit in with other players' roles if the play is to continue. In role play children can: practice turn-taking and waiting, learn to delay gratification and how to empathise by identifying with the feelings of the roles they play.

Some other concepts which may help teachers understand play from a relational perspective include an awareness of power-dynamics, group and individual agency, making choices as well as the improvisational nature of children's play. All these concepts contribute towards helping teachers work with young children.

The flow-on effects of teachers' appreciative understanding of play are likely to include teachers creating conditions for and extending children's meaningful play. Teachers are very influential in creating play-conducive conditions as in controlling routines, creating a physical layout, supplying resources and maintaining the general tone of interpersonal relationships within early childhood centres (Alcock, 2006). Teachers also provide mediating artefacts, such as large cardboard boxes in the following events.



*Box play events:*

The following two events, spaced a month apart, involved the same large cardboard boxes, with some of the same children using these boxes, as versatile, transformational, props or artefacts. Teachers controlled the physical and temporal spaces for this play, thus permitting the boxes to be moved to different areas even though the 'box play' interrupted the routine of the centre.

The boxes have already undergone several transformations, all based on the children Eliza and Frank's experiences and understandings of the world, gleaned from the media, books, TV, adult talk:

Frank: "This is going to be a fire truck and a police van." [to the researcher]

Eliza, playing alongside, is busy joining two boxes together with sellotape.

Frank: "You know what Sophie?"

Researcher: "What?"

Frank: "This is our pirate ship."

The morning tea routine interrupts the play flow and Eliza drags the pirate ship closer to the eating area and ties it up with some string. Teachers determine these routines, thus interrupting this play so not enabling this particular episode to develop in complexity.

After morning tea, Eliza is preoccupied with her new baby brother who also attends the centre. Milly, (4 years) picks up a pirate ship box and puts it on her head, like a giant hat, and walks off. Frank, seeing this, somehow entices her back to the original play space with the box. When I look again (a few minutes later) the boxes have become beds. Frank turns out the lights saying seriously:

Frank: "It's going to be night time. I'll just close the curtains".

Milly: "laughs."

Frank: "No, that's not funny. If you laugh you won't be able to be in my game".

Milly "Okay". [She shuts her eyes super-tightly, for a few seconds]

Frank: "It's going to be morning. We're going to do everything special today". [said with pleasure] as he turns the lights on and opens the curtains.

(29.09.2000)

**Mediating repetition and imitation in play**

The repetitive and imitative activity of pretend role play can mediate children's developing understandings of the adult world as they learn to separate meanings from words and symbols from objects, and develop their understandings of concepts. The cardboard boxes came to symbolise a variety of objects which had both generalised and personal meanings for the



children in their play. From a socio-cultural perspective the children repetitively playing with the boxes as symbolic objects, could be said to be developing: "scientific (academic) concepts" from "spontaneous concepts" (Vygotsky 1986).

This process of developing concepts is integral to the repetition and imitation, the negotiating of rules around roles, the personal sense and meaning-making of pretend role play. Imitation is not simply copy-cat behaviour. Children pretending and imitating are actively and creatively developing their understandings of the concepts they imitate (Vygotsky, 1978).

Frank was observed role-playing sleeping rituals on several occasions: it is likely that he was internalising his own sleeping rituals aesthetically, emotionally and cognitively. Frank used his imagination to exercise control – to regulate – his understandings of his real sleeping rituals. Cardboard boxes, words, and other children mediated this process. These artefacts also mediated communication, developing relationships and togetherness, which seem to be common goals in much of the children's play (Alcock, 2006, 2007). In this event Milly's sense of humour and Frank's subtle playfulness, contributed flexibility to the role-playing and the internalisation process and the teacher-controlled environment afforded the opportunities for this play.

This event also clarifies how exposure to experiences in the world assists the development of the imagination, by providing the child with imaginative resource material. Experiences include books and other media, as well as direct experience. In this case Frank brought his experience of adventure and vehicles to the play with reference to: police vans, fire trucks, and pirate ships, as well as beds and sleeping routines (lights out, curtains closed). Experience in the real world informed his abilities to think imaginatively and analytically and to play aesthetically. He understood that light during the day follows the dark night and he could think and plan ahead: "It's going to be morning. We're going to do everything special today". Combining imagination with an inherent playfulness, enabled Frank to pleasurably and poetically - aesthetically - plan for the day ahead and allow Milly to enjoy her supportive role in the play.

*Box play continues:*

The previous day Pip had hidden in a box and Eliza and Tom had put boxes on their heads and walked around bumping into each other on purpose, having fun experiencing different visual fields. All four of the children involved in the following event had been on an aeroplane, three overseas. Tom had returned the previous week from Canada, full of these stories, and Pip was soon to go to France. Pip's mother is French.

Frank and Milly were humorously playing a jack-in-the-box game where they shut themselves in a box, held the flaps down, then together jumped up laughing. After the jack-in-the-box play, Milly was hiding alone in the box and teacher Jim jokingly commented:

Teacher Jim: "Oh, we'd better put this empty box away as no one's using it."

On being told that Milly was inside, (which he knew), he suggested posting Milly, off to France.



Teacher Jim: "Who's got a stamp?"

Pip: "Put a stamp on me so I can go off to France too."...  
[excitedly]

Tom (4 years, 9 months) also joins the activity. Children begin drawing stamps on boxes, all talking together discussing and imagining traveling - by plane - to France and Canada. They take turns sellotaping up the large cardboard boxes of those that want to be posted, with the children inside. (28.8.2000).

### **More artefact mediated intersubjectivity**

Playful events such as the above cannot be understood without focusing on the nature of the interactions and relationships. In playing Jack-in-the-box Frank and Milly were having fun, joking with the incongruity of obvious hiding and sudden surprising, while also being in control in unison and experiencing very physical feelings of together crouching to hide, and jumping up in surprise. Their crouching down and jumping up roles synchronistically expressed and embodied their shared intersubjectivity (Goncu, 1993).

Milly, hiding in the box, was imitating others that she had observed doing likewise. However, to play the activity provides a different experience from that of observing others. Frank and Milly together re-created the hiding game in their unique way, not copying, but appropriating, imitating, and adapting the activity of hiding and surprising. By playing with concepts in this experimental way, external concepts associated with their roles gradually acquired an internalised sense and meaning (Zinchenko, 2001). By using mediating artefacts to playfully develop these roles and associated concepts these children were furthering their understandings of abstract concepts in concretely playful ways.

The physical environment enabled these children to play with the cardboard boxes in a variety of ways: the boxes mediated children playing collaboratively and relating intersubjectively. Through sharing and complementing each other in the roles they played, the children's consciousness, cognition (Salomon, 1993), emotions and imagination became distributed across the players. Shared, distributed consciousness contributed complexity to the children's playfulness and loosely united the children in activity, creating shared zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus the sum became greater than the parts.

Themes related to sleeping, travel and hiding, with their associated roles were recurrent in the play with boxes. Several researchers (Corsaro, 1997; El'koninova, 2001) have commented on the repetitiveness of pretend play themes, as well as the imitative structure of role play. Both of these aspects of play reflect children learning new concepts. Following the theories of El'konin and Vygotsky, Elkoninova (2001) suggests that the internalisation of external concepts requires repetitive play. Some concepts require a lot of repetition and this can look like imitation. For example, Frank seemed to be working on the meanings around concepts associated with sleep, day and night, and repeating these concepts in playing with Milly. Similarly, the theme of hiding and surprising was repeated by several children, using the large boxes as mediating artefacts, while experiencing and internalising associated feelings and thoughts.



Name play was a fairly frequent four-year old teasing, joking phenomenon in the study on which this paper is based (Alcock, 2006). It was particularly interesting because names, as personal special words, may acquire subjective meanings, contributing to children's developing feelings of identity and role. Children played with sounds as well as the meanings of names. They sometimes teased and sometimes improvised experimentally with sounds, rhyme and rhythm, creating aesthetically interesting song poems.

#### *Name play event*

This name-play event was introduced by a group of four year olds and mediated by their own peer-group 'togetherness', while waiting to be served food one lunch-time. It did not involve teachers. Anna starts playing with name sounds and the others pick it up.

- Olaf: "Tom, you've moved".
- Anna: "You know what Tom's really called? He's called Lom, Olaf's really called Lollaf".
- Olaf: "Sammy's really called Spammy".
- Sammy: "No Wammy".
- Peta: "Eeta, no Weeta and Dolly's called Polly, no Wally. Byman [Simon] Pope. My name is called Geeta".
- Sammy: "My name is Wammy". [repeats 3x, to everyone]
- Olaf: "I'm Lollaf".
- Anna: "I'm Panna".
- Tom: "Tom's name is called crrrrrrr..."[moving chair a lot, while making sounds, rather than words]
- Sammy: "My name is called Andewope, I'm Andewope".
- Tom: "I'm Gwanelope".
- Sammy: "I'm Ropeerope".
- Tom: "I'm Hairyhair".
- Sammy: "I'm Photograph".
- Tom: "I'm Motograph".
- Anna: "And my name is Wupwupglee".  
(15.12.1999)

#### **Words as artefacts mediating aesthetically**

This name play was not as linear as it reads. The children spoke quickly, intersubjectively, dialogically and chaotically in tune with each other, using their imaginations to aesthetically create sounds and meanings. The words they created as names conjured up images of absurd nonsense roles,



perhaps freeing them from the mundane constraints and roles associated with their real names. The children played with the rules for words and the rules for play, clearly asserting themselves. For example, Sammy refused to be called Spammy, substituting Wammy, while Olaf accepted his name was Lollaf, and announced this to all. Interestingly, Anna was both first and last speaker, almost symmetrically and poetically rounding out the event. This play with their names mediated children's individual and group awareness, agency, and consciousness. In this way words mediate consciousness becoming a social process.

Words, including names, offered great possibilities for creative play. This play varied from subversive and humorous, to aesthetically appealing tone and sound combinations that also combined meaning. Play with names and other words was a common playful occurrence in all three early childhood centres in the wider study (Alcock, 2006). This play seemed to emerge spontaneously when children played together when the teachers were often absent.

The improvisational, creative and collaborative nature of children being playful together is fascinating. Sawyer (1997) suggests that this type of improvised group collaboration has important implications for children's developing creative abilities because creativity involves both improvisation and collaboration. Rhythm is also an important aspect of musical improvisation and play has aspects of performance. Rhythm, words and sounds all mediated the playful communication and connectedness of these children.

### **Roles and goals: Childrens' and teachers' playfulness**

Children's roles in these events reflected the dynamics of their various relationships. Relationships and roles also reflected the goals of the activity. Thus teachers and children engaged in the same activity usually had different goals (and roles), so were differently motivated to engage in the activity. For example the play events may be understood on several levels simultaneously, reflecting the different goals of the players as well as the goals of the interpreting researcher.

The pretend role-play of young children is of particular interest, because in pretend play children do slip in and out of role, experiencing a range of different ways of being and relating. Children's pretend roles reflect the culture of adults and the wider world. From this perspective children play at roles to make sense of the world in order to actively, playfully, create and re-create, rather than to copy or directly imitate roles (Sutton-Smith, 1971). They do not play to escape reality, but to experience and understand it. An inherent part of being playful adds a creative edge to how children internalise and re-create roles, without rigidly following the rules of play.

In a study of the history of the early childhood centre, and teachers' personalities, can be seen to influence how teachers understand their roles in relation to both children and teachers being playful. Within each early childhood centre equipment, planned activities, physical space, and teachers' attitudes could be seen as reflecting and endorsing the accepted centre rules as norms for what sort of playful and humorous behaviour would be condoned and made acceptable (El'konin, 2001; Kalliala, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). A few teachers did initiate, support, and relate to children playfully. Teacher Jim did sensitively and proactively initiate and further develop the children's play with boxes in the event presented earlier in this article. He also complicated the box play by turning it into posting parcels and being



playful. However other teachers seemed to view their roles as teachers more seriously and less playfully.

The lack of teacher involvement in many of the playful events in this study suggested that teachers may be missing out on extending and enjoying young children's communicative play. Playfulness may be an important disposition for learning (Carr, 2001), both for children being playful in the present world and for children developing and learning to be citizens in an unpredictable future world. Goncu & Perone, (2005) suggest that playfulness may encompass important communication and coping skills for adults living in a complex world, being faced with making increasingly complex choices.

The concepts of distributed cognition, imagination, and feelings described in these events incorporate a view of communication as a continuously emergent dynamic process of becoming (Fogel, 1993), as individuals connect with others and the environment in complex networked ways. Children playfully involved in any one activity may also simultaneously be participating in many other visible and invisible activities contributing to multiple goals. Both individual children's goals and group ones are represented in the events above. The transformation of cardboard boxes, from beds to a plane to Jack-in-the-boxes to parcels with children inside, reflect individual children's experiences in a social world. These experiences became imaginatively, emotionally, cognitively shared across the group blending individual and group goals.

The children in these and other events (Alcock, 2006) used a wide range of artefacts (Wartofsky, 1979) in their communication. Both material artefacts (cardboard boxes) and non-material artefacts (words, gestures, signs) mediated and connected individual children in patterns of playful communication which seemed to diverge and emerge in various patterns reflecting the power, imagination and goals of the individual players. Thus knowledge was re-created and distributed in the artefacts which children both embodied and used to represent and express ideas and feelings. The material artefacts afforded in the early childhood setting are powerful determinants of children's sign and symbol usage. Shared and distributed cognition/emotion and imagination, expressing and representing feelings and ideas, all depend on appropriate conditions, including children having opportunities to practice using many different artefacts in their communication. Teacher awareness of the subtleties of artefact mediation is important for teachers relating meaningfully with the children they teach.

For the children, links with the wider community and between their families and the centre were expressed in how and what they played at (including the motivation to play). Experiences from home and places outside the early childhood centre prompted communication in the centre. From El'konin's (2000) perspective, the re-creation of aspects of the adult world is the main function of play. These events and the wider study (Alcock, 2006) suggest that, aside from such utilitarian functions togetherness and enjoyment may also be important reasons for children being playful together.

## **Conclusion**

The development of intersubjectivity, distributed cognition, imagination and feelings were common features of the children's playful communication in these and other observed events (Alcock, 2006). The phenomenon of distributed cognition explains the process whereby feelings and thoughts became distributed across individual minds engaged in a shared activity.



Imagination, improvisation, intersubjectivity, repetition and imitation were integral to this evolving process, influencing how children used the artefacts that mediated their playful communication and connections. These artefacts included non-material signs, tools and symbols as well as material objects (Wartofsky, 1979). Children created aesthetic experiences in the ways in which they used artefacts - such as words, bodies, and boxes - in their playful communication. They expressed ideas and feelings rhythmically, artistically and aesthetically. Children's individual subjectivities evolved and thoughts and feelings became distributed across children engaged in playful activity together so that the group became greater than the sum of its individual parts.

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