

Children Learning to Negotiate Unwritten Social Rules through Play

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Introduction

Four third grade boys, aged 8 years old, are engaged in a 20-minute long sequence of imaginative play. The boys are walking, hopping, running, and falling while they play on the snow-covered soccer field. One of the primary things they pretend during this recess period is that they are cats and dogs walking on 'radical soda', which is a mixture of toxic waste and poison. Andy points to the ground and says, 'Toxic waste. This can help us mutate', as he pretends to drink something. 'Then I turn into an evil kitten', says Andy as he crouches low. Andy stands up and holds his hands together with his elbows out to the side and acts like he is stalking something. Peter yells, 'Run!' and runs away from Andy, looking over his shoulder. One of the other boys follows him. The fourth boy walks next to Andy. Peter runs away for a few seconds, and then he turns around and runs up to Andy. The other boy who had been running also returns. Walking four abreast, the boys then walk across the field.

In my observations of elementary-age children's play during free time at school, I noticed a recurring sequence of activity within the pretend play of those four third-grade boys. Peter attempted repeatedly to contribute to the activity by providing direction about what to do next within the pretend play, but Andy was able to maintain the role of leader by refusing to follow the direction of Peter. When his contribution was not taken up by the group, Peter chose not to leave the activity, but instead remained in the role of follower within the boys' play activity.

To investigate how kidsⁱ sustain interactions with each other during play, I documented kids (aged 5 to 11) playing with their peers at summer camp and recess/break time during the school day. My participants attended camp during the day when school was closed for a three-month summer break and their parents were at work. While at camp, they participated in activities such as sports, games, swimming, field trips, and crafts. I also observed kids

playing at school during recess, an outdoor period for free play after lunch. The camp and school were located in the same town. Although located adjacent to a major interstate highway and not far from the city of Denver, Colorado, USA, the town has a rural feel with many farms and acres of undeveloped space.

In the introductory case of a child negotiating his location within the hierarchy of his peer group, Peter's efforts were repeatedly hindered by demonstrating that he was willing to give directive authority to Andy by continually returning to Andy and following his lead. This is an example of the complex ways children use talk and action to negotiate the unwritten social rules that guide interactions. Unwritten social rules can guide or determine various aspects of play, including rules around deciding who is in charge and how games are selected. In the case of the boys playing on the field, they experienced a breakdown in their negotiation of who was in charge of their pretending. A breakdown occurs when people have differing goals within an interaction and thus differing expectations for each other's talk and action (Ohtake et al., 2005). By working through this small breakdown (i.e., the negotiation of who was the boss), the boys were able to sustain their play together.

My study focuses on kids' interactions with their peers during play at camp and at recess. When kids play with their peers, they are engaged in interactions that are different from the interactions they engage in at other times of their day. For example, most of the school day is focused on activity around adult-created goals (Newman et al, 1989; Paley, 1992; Rogoff et al, 2001). Outside of school, middle class American kids are often engaged in activities designed and organised to cultivate their development in activities valued by their parents (Lareau, 2003). For instance, activities like music lessons, sports teams, and math leagues are intended to prepare children to be middle class or upper-middle class individuals who have had a variety of childhood experiences that helped them choose their professions and hone their interests. Play can be a time, on the other hand, when kids are not under direct adult supervision and are free to choose their activities. Play and free-time contexts, such as the ones I documented at camp and recess, provide a space in which kids interact with each other outside the immediate control of adults. Their interactions during free-time contexts mostly take place within 'peer spheres' (Dyson, 1993: 3), or spaces of interaction among kids without the direct involvement of adults. When kids engage in interactions within peer spheres, they are able to practice sustaining their play without the support of adults.

The question that guides this study is: How do kids sustain interactions with each other during play? I have collected video recorded data of kids playing at camp and at recess to analyse for this project. I have worked to identify breakdowns within interactions during play by studying kids' play in detail, making use of a micro analytic approach that closely examines the use of words, gestures, and facial expressions to interpret and understand the goals, ideas, and actions of people within interactions (Goffman, 1981; Erickson, 1992).

Conceptual Framework

Various perspectives on learning view the learner, the teacher, and learning in different ways. These perspectives are conceptualizations, or ways of thinking about, and understanding, learning. One common perspective on learning is the acquisition metaphor (Sfard, 1998). In this conceptualization, knowledge is constructed and accumulated by individuals within the container of their brains; learning is understood to occur when individuals acquire information. Another metaphor for learning, and the one I have used for this study, is the participation metaphor. This conceptualization views learning as happening because of participation in communities that have shared cultural practices and activities (Lave et al, 1991; Sfard, 1998). The idea is that knowledge is located not within the individual but is distributed among community participants. Within this study, the conceptualization of learning as occurring through participation will help to explain how children learn to negotiate during play.

Offering opportunities for kids to interact within peer spheres is important because kids are able to make more choices on their own and work on their understandings of how unwritten social rules work within social interactions. Psychologists Piaget (1965) and Vygotsky (1978) have studied play as a context in which children feel safe to try out new ideas. More specifically, play offers opportunities for kids to develop an understanding of social rules (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, when little girls play at being sisters, they are typically playing based on their understanding of the 'rules' of being sisters (for example, eating meals together, having household chores etc.). They may experiment with creating new rules or ways of being sisters, and then the girls must negotiate how to bring those new rules or ideas into their play.

Social interactions of adults and kids are bound by unwritten social rules and play can help kids learn how to negotiate those rules. Thus practice with negotiating unwritten social rules is informative for our rule-bound lives. When kids' activities are structured by adults, they are not free to participate in negotiations of unwritten social rules with their peers in the same way they are able to practice this when they are interacting within peer spheres. Kids who are interacting with each other and are less closely managed by adults are engaged in 'child-to-child socialization' (Goodwin, 2006: 22) through which they practice social competence and learn how to interact with their peers. Being able to negotiate through breakdowns is important to social competence because it enables people to continue interactions with others even when they disagree or have a misunderstanding. Within the context of kids playing together, not being able to negotiate unwritten social rules usually results in the end of the play activity. The consequences might be small (for example, less fun during a recess period), but over time there could be more severe repercussions (for example, difficulty sustaining interactions and relationships with others, both personally and professionally). Thus, when they engage in peer spheres and negotiate through hitches in interactions, kids are practicing a skill that is important to their social competence and later social interactions.

When people who are communicating with each other develop a shared understanding, they have created inter subjectivity within their interaction (Wertsch, 1984). Inter subjectivity is necessary to understanding others within an interaction, so kids must develop inter subjectivity to sustain their play. The classic idea of inter subjectivity refers to a shared or partially shared view of what is going on in a situation. Participatory inter subjectivity is a useful extension of the concept. This view focuses on the coordination of communication, and it can involve both shared understandings and misunderstandings (Matusov, 1996). This is important because kids at play may create participatory inter subjectivity within disagreements as they engage in communication around the same idea or activity. When breakdowns occur in interactions, participatory inter subjectivity can help kids to sustain their play because it is this coordination of communication that helps them negotiate through breakdowns. To be clear, inter subjectivity does not mean that people share exactly the same views or that they recognise explicitly their views or the views of others; rather, inter subjectivity is created when individuals have views that are compatible enough to allow them to interact. I am going to show how the kids I studied created inter subjectivity within their interactions, which helped them negotiate through breakdowns.

Developing inter subjectivity is important to being able to participate in the shared cultural activities that make up learning experiences. By communicating and creating inter subjectivity, people are able to engage in activities together. Within the context of my study of kids' play, inter subjectivity is a part of learning in that it enables kids to negotiate through breakdowns in their play. Over time and with practice, kids will learn new and better ways of negotiating with each other. In this study, I present two instances of kids negotiating through breakdowns as an examination of parts of that learning process.

Methods

In both the camp and school recess settings, kids interacted with peers outside the immediate control of adults. That is, although adults were overseeing the activities, the kids' behaviour was not closely managed by adults. In both settings, adults watched over the kids and intervened when they were hurting each other or doing something dangerous such as climbing very high or playing with sharp items; however, the adults did not mandate particular activities be undertaken, as is the case in most school classrooms or during other structured activities. For this reason, I refer to the camp and recess settings as not closely managed or less structured settings.

Participants

The school district in which the camp and school were located is approximately 66 percent white, 27 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 1 percent American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1 percent Black (Colorado Department of Education, 2010). 75 percent of the attendees of both the camp and the school were white.

Approximately 33 percent of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (Colorado Department of Education, 2010); however, the camp and school consist mostly of middle-class familiesⁱⁱ. The socioeconomic status of children in those programmes is higher because the summer camp does not accept vouchers from Colorado's Child Care Assistance Program (i.e., families must fully pay for childcare) and the school accepts students through a voluntary application process though there is no tuition. That is, families

must self-select into the school, and middle-class families more often choose to apply and be entered into the enrollment lottery.

Procedures

Data collection

I video recorded nine hours of kids' interacting during camp. I obtained parental permission for, and child assent from, 31 of the 35 kids who attended. Kids who were taped were in grades one through five and aged between 5 and 11. All three camp staff members consented to being videotaped.

I recorded five hours of video at recess. In total, I obtained parental permission and child assent for all first, third, and fifth graders at the school (i.e., kids aged 5 through 11), which totaled 95 students. All four staff members who supervised recess consented to being videotaped.

Role of the researcher

Though the kids noticed me inserting myself into their play environments, they seemed to view me as someone who belonged at camp and recess. First, some of the kids at the camp knew me from previous summers when I had worked there. Those kids called me by my first name before I introduced myself, and those new to camp noticed this and very quickly acted familiar with me too. At recess, one girl had also attended camp and so already knew me, and she introduced me to the girls she played with. Two of the four adults who supervised recess were younger white women with brown hair who dressed in business casual clothing, and in those ways I looked very much like them. Hence, I was like the adults they regularly saw at recess. At both of my data collection sites, the kids took little notice of me after I initially introduced myself and asked if I could record their play. Occasionally, they would give me information about their activity to be sure I understood what they were doing or saying. For example, one boy turned to me during a pretend play sequence and said, *'And if you're wondering what radical soda is, it's a mix of toxic waste and poison'*. He then turned back to his playmates and continued pretending. Only one participant's activity seemed disrupted by my presence. This girl attended camp and would often stop her activity to wave at the camera and say things like, *'Hello, world!'* and talk to her peers about being on a *'reality show'*. Because a purpose of this project was to study kids while they are engaged in kid-kid

interactions during play, I decided that my being near the camera while it was recording was too disruptive to her interactions. Therefore, I decided to set up the camera on a tripod and not remain near it while recording her, and she seemed not to notice the camera as long as I was not nearby.

Data analysis

When viewing my video recordings, I looked for breakdowns in the kids' interactions during play because breakdowns are instances in which kids have trouble sustaining their play. Breakdowns are situations in which participants interacting with each other have differing goals and thus one person does not act as expected by the other (Ohtake et al., 2005). Identifying breakdowns helped me to understand kids' differing goals or expectations for play, which enabled me to analyse how they were able to work through those differences and sustain their play activity. Interaction analysis research refers to these instances of misunderstandings or misalignments as 'trouble' (Jordan and Henderson, 1995). Trouble within interactions is often repaired quickly by those involved, and both talk and physical actions are used to repair trouble. Within the context of play, breakdowns or trouble might occur when kids disagree on the rules of a game, and those participating hold differing expectations for the behaviour of their playmates. If kids are able to negotiate a common understanding following the breakdown, their play can be sustained. As analyses of trouble generally reveal 'the unspoken rules by which people organize their lives' (Jordan et al, 1995: 69), studying what kids do after a breakdown occurs helped me to identify the unwritten rules by which they organised their play. That is, the negotiations that occur to repair breakdowns or trouble are shaped by unwritten rules such as rules around which kids are excluded, who is allowed to change the official rules, and how players take turns.

After identifying instances of breakdowns, I highlighted those sections of my content log as interactions I wanted to examine more closely. I then selected some of those interactions and created transcripts of the talk and action that took place within the interactions. I then analysed the transcripts using Goffman's (1981) concept of participation frameworks to explain what kids do to sustain their play. Participation frameworks are one way of identifying patterns of communication that lead to changes in understanding, or learning. An analytic concept introduced by Goffman (1981:3), participation frameworks are the 'codification' of

participation statuses of all people who participate in an interaction. A participation status is the relative position of a person to an utterance. Frameworks also include the expected or 'appropriate' conduct of participants interacting with each other. By examining participation frameworks, we can identify breakdowns by how people are talking and doing things together. Frameworks not made up of pre-determined participation statuses but are co-created by participants within interactions, and play and free-time contexts allow kids to practice creating ways to negotiate statuses without management by adults. The ways participants co-create and engage in participation frameworks in order to learn how to negotiate is the focus of my analysis.

Data Excerpts: Who's the Boss?

As I began to watch the video I had recorded, I noticed that the kids played together as if they always had to have someone who directed the activity. I have come to think of this unwritten rule as the 'Who's the boss'? rule because the kids worked to determine who was in charge of their play. The role of the boss was sometimes negotiated within the activity because multiple participants were attempting to be in charge.

Case 1: The Boys and "Radical Soda"

In the introductory example, four boys were engaged in pretend play (see Figure 1), and negotiating the boss of the activity was a major sub-text of their play together. During their interaction, Andy narrated a pretend play sequence in which he drank '*toxic waste*' and became an '*evil kitten*'. Peter then tried to build on that idea but direct the play himself, and he yelled, '*Run!*' as he turned and ran away from the evil kitten. Peter looked back, however, and saw that only one of the other boys followed his instruction when he tried to position himself as being in charge of the activity. When Andy did not follow Peter's direction, Peter and Dylan returned to engage in what Andy and the fourth boy were doing. Many other times during the boys' pretend play sessions Peter's attempts to become the leader were hindered by him demonstrating that he was willing to give directive power to Andy by continually returning to Andy and following his lead.



Figure 1. Four boys engaged in a pretend play activity during school lunch recess.

On this day, as on several other days when I videotaped their recess, the boys spent their time engaged in pretend or imaginative play. Andy, the boy with a furry hood, glasses, and his back to the camera in Figure 1, is in charge and this is a set hierarchy that is always in place when this group of boys plays together. Another boy, however, continually challenges Andy's position as the leader. The challenger is Peter who is smaller and does not have a hat or hood. In my examination of the video and the transcripts I created based on the video, I found that the following sequence was repeated several times during the boys pretend play together: continuous pretend play, Peter gives direction, Andy ignores Peter or provides his own direction, and the play continues with the boys following Andy's lead. By not following Peter's lead, Andy positions himself as the one in charge of the group. One of the other boys, Dylan, most often followed Peter. And the fourth boy, Joey, always followed what Andy was doing.

Case 2: Amelia, Andrew, and their Uno Game

As a case of how kids negotiate through breakdowns to sustain their play, I offer the following example from the summer camp. In this excerpt, a third-grade girl and a second grade boy were playing a card game while another third-grade girl watched (see Figure 2). The kids were playing the card game Uno, which uses cards numbered one through ten and in four

different colours. Players start with seven cards and must play cards in sequential order and in the same colour. Special word cards like 'colour change' and 'skip' are also used. In this excerpt, the players disagreed about two aspects of the game: when players can make moves, and which colour cards should be played. Despite their disagreements, the kids were able to continue their game. Although they were ostensibly negotiating the official rules of the card game Uno, this was secondary to something else being negotiated: who was in charge of the game. For this example, I offer a more extended description with transcript excerpts to show how a negotiation can unfold during kids' play activity.



Figure 2. Andrew and Amelia play Uno while Olivia observes.

Approximately ten minutes into their card game, Amelia marks her disagreement with Andrew by protesting about his playing a card on the discard pile.

Amelia: *Green green green green. [Amelia lays down cards while saying aloud the cards' colors.]*

Andrew: *Okay, this is going to be easy. [Lays down a green card]*

Amelia: *[Makes a sound of protest and continues to lay down her own cards] Uh-uh. You can't go yet. [Continues to lay down cards]*

Andrew: *Yeah you can. You can move whenever you want.*

The two then engage in an argument about whether the rules of Uno allow them to make moves '*whenever you want*', as Andrew says in turn 4. Amelia believes they must take turns, but Andrew thinks they can play cards at any time. The players are disagreeing, but their talk continues to focus on a shared idea (i.e., the rules of the game regarding turn taking). Amelia is also beginning to position herself to gain a participation status as the player who is knowledgeable about the rules of the game.

Although the game continues, Andrew and Amelia have not resolved their disagreement. Andrew protests at the way Amelia is interpreting the rules, saying, '*You can go when-*' but Amelia interrupts him and continues to lay down her cards. Olivia, a spectator, tells Amelia that she has made an error. Amelia disagrees and says she made a colour change previously. Amelia and Andrew continue playing, and then Andrew again makes a move when it is not his designated turn, which Amelia believes to be against the rules. She objects verbally, and she tries to physically block Andrew from being able to make a play. Amelia is directing Andrew, but he is not giving in to her attempts to control his actions.

Amelia: [Show her cards to Olivia and talks to her while Andrew plays one card] *Look at the rest of mine.* [Talks aloud while laying down four "skip" cards] *Skip your turn, skip your turn, skip your turn, skip your turn.*

Andrew: [Forcefully lays down a card] *Skip your turn.*

Amelia: [Pushes his hand aside and pushes one of his cards out of the pile and onto his side of the table. Then she talks while laying down two cards onto the discard pile] *Blue six, blue nine.* [Amelia plays these two blue cards on top of green cards she and Andrew played on their prior turns. She plays the blue six immediately after a green five.]

Andrew: [Talks while Amelia is still laying down her cards] *I can move right now. I can move right now. Skip!* [Said as he slaps a card down on the pile]

Andrew does speak of turns and of using the 'skip' card not to allow Amelia to take a turn. It is difficult, however, to understand what Andrew's idea of a 'turn' is, given that he has previously

stated that a player can '*move whenever you want*'. In turn 7, Amelia again uses a physical action to impede Andrew's play by pushing one of his cards out of the discard pile. Andrew takes back the cards that Amelia pushed toward him

Next, Amelia victoriously displays that she is about to win the game because she has only two cards left while Andrew has more than that. She displays her imminent victory by holding up the only two cards in her hand and saying, '*Taaa-daaa!*' in a sing-song voice. Andrew seems to say, however, that she will not be able to win because her turn is being skipped. He is contesting his status as a directed player, or the one who is not in charge of the game, by pointing out that he has skipped Amelia. Hence, Andrew is attempting to direct Amelia's moves. She challenges him by saying, "*Oh yeah?*" They then argue more about whether Amelia played according to the rules about card colour and about whether Andrew can take a turn whenever he wants. The argument ends when Amelia dramatically concedes to Andrew.

Amelia: *Okay fine.* [Says the following in a low tone and with a shake of her head] *Boys. They always get their ways.* [looks at Olivia] *Even my brother.*

Andrew: *Yeah I'm not saying that I'm getting my way=*

Amelia: *=Go. Go. Go.*

Andrew: [He looks at the cards in his hand and plays some into the discard pile.]

At this end of this excerpt, Amelia positioned herself as having to give in to Andrew so that the game could continue by saying, 'Boys. They always get their ways'. By acting exasperated with Andrew and saying that he was getting his way because he was a boy, she put him into the role of rule-breaker and herself into the role of magnanimous conceiver. She used a gender stereotype about boys getting their ways even when they are wrong, and she positioned herself as the girl who, once again, is letting a boy have his way. Though they have argued back and forth, Amelia eventually allows the cards game to continue by telling Andrew to proceed and stop talking about the disagreement.

Discussion

These two examples of kids playing together in peer spheres showed kids engaging in complex negotiations over an unwritten social rule (i.e., who was in charge). When the boys

pretended they were evil kittens, Andy was able to gain the role of the director or boss within the interaction. In the Uno card game example, Amelia was able to negotiate herself into the position of having the power to give in to Andrew so the game could continue. By working through the various hitches or breakdowns in their interactions, the kids sustained their play together.

Inter subjectivity

While the four boys played together, they developed participatory inter subjectivity during their imaginative play interaction. Though Peter and Andy did not maintain the shared goal of who would direct the activity, they did engage in communication around the same idea or activity (Matusov, 1996). Specifically, when Andy was pretending to be an 'evil kitten', Peter yelled for the other two boys to run away. At that time, Peter was attempting to direct the boys' pretend play. Andy did not share that idea about Peter's role and did not respond by chasing Peter. Though the boys did not both view Peter as the leader of the activity, they did share the understanding that they were engaged in pretend play. When Peter returned to Andy's side, the boys continued to walk across the field together and were soon engaged in a mock sword battle on an imaginary ship. In this example, the boys experienced a misunderstanding of roles, but their communication was still coordinated around being engaged in pretend play together. Thus although there was a breakdown in their interaction, they developed participatory inter subjectivity, which helped them negotiate through the breakdown.

Amelia and Andrew also created participatory inter subjectivity within their interaction. They had a shared goal of continuing their card game, and they used talk and actions to negotiate through their disagreement. One notable aspect of the inter subjectivity they developed was the kids' use of demonstration. At various points, both Amelia and Andrew referred back to the discard pile and pointed to cards in their hands. These physical gestures were important to the creation of inter subjectivity within the game because it helped them to coordinate their communication. Gestures can be used to help people discuss ideas around the same topic, while still disagreeing about who is correct (Nathan, 2007). Because Amelia and Andrew had developed participatory inter subjectivity, or coordinated communication, they were able to negotiate through the breakdown and sustain their play.

Participation Frameworks and Roles

In my analysis of the boys' pretend play interaction I found that the participation framework they had created was flexible enough to allow for changes in scene. The four boys started with discovering 'radical soda' that turned them into 'evil kittens', then they went to a 'medical motor factory' where they were attacked by bombs, and at the end of their play they were engaged in a 'cannon battle' on a ship. Changes in scene occurred when the boys looked like they were aimlessly walking or running around the playground field. They would play out a scenario, run or walk around the field, and then Andy would introduce a new scenario. For example, after the boys had imagined a bomb was falling on them at one point, Andy ran part way across the field and stopped abruptly. Andy then asked the other boys, 'Do you want to have a cannon battle'? and Peter answered, 'Yes'! The other two boys also played in the ensuing cannon battle, but only Andy and Peter spoke during the play interaction. Throughout the interaction, Andy or Peter would yell directions or suggestions about the imaginary situation. For example, Andy said, 'It's just like for fun and we like get hurt when we are battling with swords'. After he said this, Joey acted as if he were slicing at Andy with a sword. The participation framework allowed for the focus of the boys' action to shift repeatedly as either Andy or Peter called out information about the emergent scene they were enacting. Only Andy's ideas about the scenario, however, were regularly taken up by the group.

Given that there were many shifts in the action, the role of director was prominent in the pretend play interactions that I documented. The director managed the play by guiding or ordering other players to act in particular ways. The director makes decisions based on personal preference and implicit rules. Peter and Andy were both vying for the role of director within the play interaction on the field. At one point when the four boys were walking around the field and Peter abruptly fell to the ground, Andy said, 'That makes you lose ten health'. Peter said, 'I still have ten health left', but Andy disagreed and stated, 'No, you have 90 health left'. Peter did not respond and instead started to walk, run, and hop to another area of the playground field. At other times Peter was able to direct Andy, such as when he said, 'I like make you mad so you punch me', and Andy pretended to punch Peter forcefully in the face. Peter's successes at directing occurred when he gave powerful roles to Andy. Andy, as the boss of the boys' play activity, was able to direct the imagined scenario.

The participation framework created within the card game Uno was based on referencing the rules of the game and on the idea that there was a correct way to play the game. At various times during their card game, Amelia and Andrew spoke about specific moves made illegally by the other player. In Amelia's case, she told Andrew that he 'can't go yet' because it was not his turn. Andrew insisted saying, 'I can. I can. I can do that'. With regard to Andrew, he told Amelia that she made an error because she 'didn't change the color', meaning that she played green cards when she should have played blue cards. In contrast to the pretend play case in which the four boys made decisions based on personal preference or their ideas about how the imaginary situation should be played out, the Uno game was played under the assumption that explicit rules defined a correct way to play. Based on their belief that the game should be played according to a particular way, the kids created a rule-referencing participation framework within their interaction.

Both Amelia and Andrew had a shared goal of continuing the game, and the roles they took on helped them to negotiate through their disagreement about the game's rules to sustain their play. That is, one of the players had to give in to the other so that the game could continue. If neither had conceded, their communication breakdown would have prevented proceeding with the game. They created a participation framework made up of their negotiated participation statuses of game director (i.e., the player in charge) and game player. Amelia became the director when she interrupted Andrew, physically blocking him from making moves, and getting him to undo his moves by taking back cards that he had played. At the end of the game, neither player admitted to being wrong, but Amelia did take on the responsibility of giving in. Thus Amelia was able to take charge of their play by directing Andrew.

Conclusion

When kids engage in play or playful activities, they must develop intersubjectivity to interact with each other and be able to engage in communication around the same idea or task. Because it facilitates communication, intersubjectivity enables kids to negotiate through breakdowns in their play. Thus intersubjectivity is necessary to kids being able to negotiate during play. Participating in such negotiations is how people learn to negotiate. Without intersubjectivity, the interactions might have ended with one or more of the kids walking away

and seeking a new partner for play. Negotiating intersubjectivity involves understanding what they are doing together within the boundaries of the action, or the explicit or written rules of the context. Additionally, they must understand the unwritten rules that shape their engagement within the interaction, such as which kid has the role of boss or director within the activity.

In this study, I found that interactions during play are a context in which kids are continually practicing negotiating breakdowns to sustain their play. Play is a relatively safe context in which kids can experiment and try things out (Vygotsky, 1978; Garvey, 1990), but opportunities for kids to interact in peer spheres are diminishing as recess time is cut because of the increased focus on academic standards and because the activities of American middle-class kids are more tightly scheduled and controlled by adults (Lareau, 2003). When kids interact in peer spheres, they are doing something they cannot do when they are in activities that are closely managed by adults. Thus the reduction of time for interactions within peer spheres greatly reduces kids' opportunities to practice negotiating through breakdowns in interactions.

Notes

ⁱ I follow Thorne (1993) and refer to these American children as "kids." As Thorne (1993:8-9) writes, American children often view the term "child" as an insult, at least in part because it is a word that points out they are young. Instead, "kid" is the word they use to refer to themselves and to their peers within a United States context

ⁱⁱ Lareau (2003:7) defines American middle-class families by those with parents who generally own their homes.

instead of rent, have a college education, and have "interesting, complex, and well-paying jobs." Upper-class adults have professions such as lawyers and doctors, while typical middle-class professions include mid-level managers, teachers, and engineers. Working-class and poor families often receive government assistance to pay for childcare, food, health care, and rent. For Lareau and for this study, class in America was not defined by income but by lifestyle markers such as profession and education.

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