Conflict resolution and children’s behaviour: observing and understanding social and cooperative play in early years educational settings

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Conflict resolution and children’s behaviour: observing and understanding social and cooperative play in early years educational settings

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This paper draws from continuing research into the growth of sociability and cooperation in young children. It began in the mid-1980s and has continued periodically in a range of early years educational settings across the 3–6 age range. The research has underpinned the development of an observational tool. This tool – the Social Play Continuum or SPC – has been used in personal and paired data collection by the author and jointly with early years educators. This paper draws from play observations of nursery children (aged 3–4 years) and reception class children (aged 4–5 years) in one school. The focus here is on conflict in play and its interpretation. The paper considers a relationship with stress in children’s lives and its potential impact on playful learning needs. The author advocates increases in playful learning and pedagogies rather than engagements with conflict resolution programmes. Three data-based vignettes contextualise children’s play to illustrate the need to deepen understanding through observation about the nature of conflicts – with peers and with adults – and the wider implications for playful pedagogies.

Keywords: playful learning; conflict; observing play; playful pedagogies

Introduction and background to the study

This research has consistently focused on children’s play with peers; it is the play that is observed, recorded and analysed and not individual dispositions to be cooperative. The work draws from social-constructivist frames of reference with an alignment between the Social Play Continuum (SPC) (see Appendix 1), the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the impact of ‘expert others’ (Vygotsky 1976, 1978, 1986); expert others may be peers or adults (Broadhead 2004, 2006). The research maintains that educators should understand how peers act as expert others in order to be expert others themselves and to facilitate playful learning through playful pedagogies. Over time, the SPC was developed to illustrate children’s uses of language and action/interaction with peers as a progression along four domains – the Associative domain, the Social domain, the Highly Social domain and the Cooperative domain, in keeping with the inherent and implied progression of a personal ZPD. The Cooperative domain reveals links with intellectual endeavour through, for example, problem-setting and problem-solving and the more complex uses of language which progress play. The SPC’s joint use for observations by

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researcher and educator supports post-observation reflection where the educator, knowing the children, can give potentially deeper meanings to play in relation to her/his knowledge of children’s home and school experiences. In post-observation reflections, educators can reflect on the efficacy of their pedagogy in supporting the potential for cooperative play through resourcing and organisation. The reflections also reveal how pedagogical knowledge is shaped by observation and reflection. This paper will illustrate key aspects of these processes.

**Building the dataset**

Observations have consistently focused on traditional areas of classroom provision where children were likely to play interactively. Based on other studies (Broadhead 2004) these were identified as sand play, water play, role play (such as a home corner), large construction and small construction/small world play. Observations last as long as children remain playing (a minimum of two children). During observations, language, action and reciprocity are recorded via the behaviour categories across the four domains of the SPC (Side 1). In addition, the SPC depicts the characteristics of play in each domain (Side 2). These characteristics support observers in selecting the play domain that, in their view, characterises the observed play. With joint observations this is undertaken individually prior to post-observation discussions and becomes a means of validating the SPC in relation to the consistency of mutual selection. Across the periods of research, the corroboration rate of the independent selection of the dominant domain has been high, always above 90%, suggesting that the SPC has validity in capturing the dominant play domain of interacting peers from insider (educator) and outsider (researcher) perspectives. Observations recorded on the SPC are complemented by the observers’ notes to provide detail for post-observation reflection, data analysis and the development of vignettes for dissemination. Usually, the researcher’s notes are more detailed than the educator’s; where permission is given the educator’s SPC and written notes are photocopied for the dataset. These additional notes correspond to a number on the SPC. The numbers depict the order in which the action/language is recorded on Side 1 of the SPC with number 1 being the first observed instance of play. This gives detail on the progression of play across the four domains. Post-observation discussions are taped with permission or notes taken. Pedagogical decisions are noted on Side 2 of the SPC in the space allocated. The SPC is designed to support simultaneous development of and research into playful learning.

This period of research involved two schools, one of which, Bridgehead, had welcomed the research focus because of what it perceived as escalating levels of conflict and unacceptable behaviour. This research is reported here. Bridgehead is a large primary school (3–10 years) in the North-East of England serving a low-income, suburban community in a mid-sized city. In the nursery for children aged 3–4 years, playful learning was the preferred pedagogy. In the reception class for children aged 4–5 years, teacher-directed learning dominated; playful learning had been minimal and was introduced for the research project.

Educators’ pedagogies of play influence the balance of child- and adult-initiated learning opportunities (Wood 2007a, 2007b) and these in turn influence the levels of play. In predominantly teacher-directed classrooms, play is generally provided as a reward for ‘hard work’ rather than recognised as a potentially valuable learning experience.
Conflict resolution and children’s behaviour: approaches, perspectives and possibilities

Studies show that improvement in social skills can reduce misbehaviour in young children (MacMullin 1994). Jordon and Le Metais (1997) showed similar impact on 11- to 12-year-olds subsequent to an intervention programme aimed at developing cooperative skills in classrooms. In both studies, the children’s lack of social skills was perceived as linked to designations of misbehaviour or disruptive behaviour by class teachers largely because the inability to socially engage increased the levels of conflict. Jordon and Le Metais (1997) draw on Graves and Graves (1990) who note that humans are not born cooperative and do not know instinctively how to interact. As with all skills, sociability is learned in facilitative contexts. This has led to programmes of intervention to improve social skills and these have been reported as effective in the USA (Hahn et al. 2007). In relation to the UK, a literature review (Sawyer et al. 1997) maintains that there is evidence to suggest that short-term conflict-resolution programmes delivered by teachers are effective in the short term. There is also some evidence that long-term programmes covering social problem-solving, social awareness and emotional literacy in which teachers reinforce the classroom curriculum in all interactions with children are effective in the long term. Conflict-resolution programmes are growing but they may not be the only, or the best, way of developing children’s social skills repertoires; play and regular peer engagement in problem-solving and personally relevant activities may be more effective and more likely to promote learning.

A contrasting view to that of intervention maintains that reconciliation and compromise are integral to human development and survival, and that there are sound evolutionary reasons for peace-keeping tendencies across many animal species, including humans (Aureli and de Waal 2000). Their edited publication draws attention to the naturally occurring routines and rituals that many species, including humans, incorporate into their repertoires to regulate interactions to sustain group life. Conflict arises from group living but individuals need to reduce its cost by mitigating competition and by developing strategies to resolve conflicts of interest. The forthcoming vignettes illustrate how play stimulates social skill development in problem-solving contexts in naturalistic and child-orientated ways.

Butovskaya et al. (2000) reviewed four international studies showing that young children make peace after conflict, increasingly so as they become older, if opportunities present themselves in their daily lives. Their review revealed cultural influences on the inclination to make peace after conflict and it appears at an earlier age in cultures where cooperation and kinship are highly valued as cultural norms. Young children are capable of resolving peer conflicts without the direct intervention of adults (Killen and Turiel 1991). Young children’s social conflicts are often about object sharing and Hay and Ross (1982) showed them engaging in object disputes in which children use toys as bargaining tools for social interaction. They state that this may provide experiential sources for moral development in ways that engaging in aggressive conflicts does not. Relationships with objects and their use is a key feature within the SPC, reflecting the Vygotskyan view that tools change us intellectually. In the cooperative domain, offering and accepting objects sustains and extends the play theme.

Verbeek et al. (2000) maintain that children will often agree to overcome their differences to resume a mutually rewarding interaction. As children become older, maintaining peer relations is more complex and aspects of friendship become
entwined; conflict management is closely tied to friendship relations; conflicts are essential in initiating and maintaining friendships. In this research, we noted that from the extended periods of play arising from the pedagogical changes in the classrooms, friendships emerged, suggesting that it may not only be a function of maturity but also of familiarity and opportunity. This is illustrated below.

This framing of conflict resolution premises that cooperative classroom practices break down the competition and individualism of traditional education. Kivel (2006) questions the motives for conflict-resolution programmes asking whether they aim to quieten children rather than promote their leadership and participatory qualities.

Alongside these reflections should sit an awareness of the levels of stress with which many young children now live, both in and out of school, and in particular those children whose family lives are rooted in economic disadvantage and poverty. In the UK, the Mental Health Foundation issued a statement in 2003, under the then Director Ruth Lesirge, identifying that mental health problems in children were on the increase and that to counteract this work must be done to help children develop networks of friends, increase their self-esteem and to give them the skills, confidence and ability to relate to a wide range of adults and children. Play was acknowledged as central. In 2006, June McKerrow, the then Director of the Mental Health Foundation, reiterated these findings stating that one in five young people under 20 were estimated to have mental health problems ranging from anxiety to major psychotic disorders. Pre-school children displaying high levels of aggression are at risk of behaviour problems and other social and emotional challenges throughout their lives (Davenport and Bourgeois 2008). Play may not be a panacea but it has been noted from my own work and from that of others in the field that it is possible to see a relationship between play, self-worth, creativity and friendship building, as explored in the forthcoming vignettes.

Conditions of stress affect the quality of life for all family members and whilst young children may not directly understand the economic consequences of low income, they do register and live amidst the associated conditions of adult stress that accompanies poverty; they bring these realisations, concerns and uncertainties into the classroom as integral to their identity. Conflict resolution is not therefore merely a matter of ‘skill level’ but exists within a broader frame of human experience whereby stress and conflict may be intertwined; they are natural conditions which all adults and children experience to some degree but which are experienced at especially high levels for children whose families live with poverty, low income and high levels of day-to-day stress, as was the case for many families using Bridgehead School.

School and classroom environments can also be stressful. There is nothing inherently natural in children being together in large groups with few adults and in sometimes cramped conditions. The only amelioration between such conditions and stress is the teachers’ capacity for implementing effective pedagogy wherein the child’s sense of self, identity and purpose might find voice amidst the crowds, clutter and demands of the given curriculum. To lose one’s identity within a crowd is inherently stressful for both adults and children; resilience and coping strategies grow from experience, exposure and reassurance during childhood. In England, there is concern about the levels of stress that arise for young children from environments where teaching to the test has had a strong hold from age five onwards, since curriculum changes brought about by the Education Reform Act 1988. Many have argued that this has increased teacher-directed activity, has diminished playful learning debates and has driven play from early years classrooms (see e.g. Bennett and Kell 1989; Cleave and Brown 1991; Anning 1997; Broadhead 1997, 2001, 2004, 2006).
Findings in Bridgehead School

Nine joint observations were made in the nursery class and 11 in the reception class across the traditional areas of provision outlined above. Across the four domains of the SPC we made post-observation judgements about where the observations were located, and these are given in Table 1.

Play in nursery (aged 3–4 years) was found to be at the upper end of the SPC with seven/nine observations in the cooperative and highly social domains. Play in the reception class (4–5 years) was in the middle domains with no play in the more challenging cooperative domain and only 4/11 being highly social; the reception class children were older but teacher-directed learning had been a main pedagogical driver, and play materials had been introduced for research purposes. On the final day of observation, the two educators exchanged classes and undertook joint observations with the researcher in their colleague’s classroom. This supported three-way post-observation reflections to consider what the adults’ role was in promoting cooperative play. Our observations and reflections noted, and the above findings confirmed, that age was not a key determinant in attaining cooperative play with its higher levels of cognitive challenge. The play was also influenced by:

- the children’s familiarity with the play materials and the play potential of the materials;
- regular and sustained access to the play materials where play themes could be developed and deepened over time;
- flexibility within the play resources to accommodate the children’s own prior learning and their thematic interests;
- opportunities for the children to work though their instances of conflict and return to their play materials and play themes.

Observations showed that these characteristics were more evident in nursery. There was also less peer conflict in evidence; however, the reception teacher noted that peer conflict reduced as children gained extended access to play materials as research progressed.

Three vignettes from Bridgehead School

The vignettes have been reconstructed from the dataset as outlined earlier in the paper.

This first vignette relates to adult perceptions of ‘misbehaviour’. There are two issues – how is ‘misbehaviour’ defined and ‘when children speak of killing are they speaking of death’? In asking these questions the paper challenges some interpretations of children’s thematic play interests by adults. It also highlights how, when children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations in the domains of the SPC.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Associative domain</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *This means that one episode (of two in this case) identified as Social was also moving towards Highly Social.
take risks, it can bring them into conflict with adults and be interpreted as misbehaviour but it can also cooperatively and cognitively develop their play themes and build new forms of bonding, in this case across genders.

**Vignette 1 (nursery): Weddings**

**Resources:** Large construction blocks, dressing up materials, fabric

**Agreed designation on the SPC:** Cooperative domain

**Joint observation and reflection by PB and Marie, lead adult in the nursery**

Weddings had been a theme over several days of child-initiated play. Children seemed familiar with weddings either personally or through the media. This observation lasted 30 minutes and ultimately comprised five girls and three boys.

The SPC noted sustained dialogue that was activity related, with clear themes evident and associated dramatic scenarios, and with new ideas and resources extending the play. One key activity was when one boy made a construction with blocks and ‘wedding guests’ began to sit on it; another boy was watching and extended the construction as other children came to be seated. This was identified on the SPC as children displaying a shared understanding of goals – in the cooperative domain. The boy announced that this was ‘the karaoke place’ and children took turns to watch and to perform, constantly adding to the construction as more children came along. A ‘policeman’ came to the wedding because someone ‘was being naughty’. The policeman occasionally threw himself on the floor or ran across the room in role, arresting children who complied, and briefly left the wedding (this is John whom we hear talking about vampires and ‘willywetpants’ in the next vignette). None of the children’s individual interactions was extensive, but collectively the momentum and overall reciprocity of their play was high, as the SPC showed. At one point, a substitute teacher told the children to dismantle the construction as it ‘wasn’t safe’. The children began to climb down and, as she went away, climbed up again. Some climbed with confidence, some were more careful; none injured him/herself. The staff member returned and spoke to Marie about whether it should be permitted; she was anxious about accidents and seemed annoyed with the children for not doing as asked. We had observed how carefully the children climbed and how important the construction was to the extension of the play theme. Marie communicated this but the staff member remained concerned although she left the children to continue. One girl then introduced a magic wand to the wedding with themes of ‘kill you’, ‘kill her’. She moved around waving the wand over the head of others who ignored her or smiled. One child fell to the floor, pretending to ‘die’, and both children laughed. The child with the wand seemed to be in role at the wedding and was neither angry nor fierce; her play theme seemed personal to her but others were willing to accept it and interact.

**Post-observation reflection**

Marie spoke confidentially about the difficulties some children faced from home circumstances. She felt the play had been welcome in bringing together some ‘timid’ girls (one of whom had the wand) and some ‘boisterous’ boys (e.g. the ‘policeman’).
in equally weighted, interactive play. She felt the girls were enjoying the risky elements of climbing. These children all had English as a first language but had differing levels of language ability. However, they were able to interact equally within these contiguous, self-selected play themes.

There were occasions when some players were engaged in parallel or associative play but the extended observation had shown these children also involved in play in the cooperative domain on the SPC. Youell (2008) identifies play and playfulness as developmental achievements with huge variations in the capacity individual children have to make use of opportunities. The building of the karaoke construction became a focal point suggesting leadership and participatory qualities of the initiating boy (Kivel 2006). References to ‘killing’ seemed neither violently intended nor evidence of conflict (as might normally be perceived by adults) and seemed, rather, to be an integral part of the ‘wand’ narrative within the overall story. Holland (2003) speaks of such play as a natural exploration of death and its consequences. The wand is a high status object that can wield magic (Paley 1984).

Marie reflected on the concerns of the staff member and agreed that, had she not been observing and framing a deeper understanding of the cohesion within the play, she might have responded similarly. Marie sensed anger from her colleague towards seemingly disobedient children – a sense perhaps of conflict or subversion. Marie felt that she might have responded similarly had she not been aware of the care the children were taking and the integral part that the construction played in their developing play themes. She felt the observations would shape her evolving pedagogy around safety and risk-taking. Each child had met the physical challenge with differing degrees of confidence but it had clearly been important to confront danger and overcome fears. In this, they were not misbehaving, Marie felt, but were exercising choice regarding the levels of physical challenge they were choosing to confront.

The second vignette reveals that play which might seem unstructured and potentially destructive and conflicting to a casual observer may in fact be opening up possibilities for the child in question to explore anxieties. We also see that despite these elements the play can, with reference to the SPC, attain a high domain of peer engagement. Marie’s comments indicate awareness of a growing friendship between the boys, a factor that may be especially helpful to John given his known emotional difficulties at home. As Rubin (1980, 70) points out:

> Friends are security givers, standards against whom one can measure oneself, partners in activities that cannot be engaged in alone, guides to unfamiliar places, and apprentices who confirm one’s own developing sense of competence and expertise.

This seems evident in this next vignette.

**Vignette 2 (nursery): Vampires, ghosts and moving toilets**

**Resources:** small world with doll’s house, furniture, miniature figures.

**Agreed designation on the SPC:** Highly Social domain

**Joint observation and reflection by PB and Marie, lead adult in the nursery**

This observation lasted 35 minutes.
Two boys were cramming the furniture and figures into one upstairs room of the doll’s house. There was a repetitive ‘get down’ theme where a play figure was moved up and down the house by John accompanied by dialogue (too quiet to hear). Alfie spent time behind the playhouse looking through the window and making comments. John sustained the ‘get down’ theme, with Alfie joining in occasionally but less intensely and often looking to John as if for approval, smiling and making eye contact. Alfie posted figures through the window; John constantly rearranged the furniture, always returning it to be crammed in an upstairs room. John referenced a ‘willywetpants’ theme both in self-talk and with Alfie. ‘Vampire’ and ‘ghost’ themes came sporadically but regularly, always introduced by John in relation to furniture location or figures interacting. At one point both boys sat behind the house with a teddy bear, throwing and catching it with much laughter and commentary. A girl entered the play; she passed the teddy to Alfie when he dropped it and also said ‘Stop throwing things’; the boys complied with her instruction and returned to their house play. The girl watched and left shortly afterwards. The SPC records occasions of offering and accepting of objects, commenting on own action, extended exchanges, sporadic dialogue developing into role play, eye contact/laughter/play noise followed by brief reciprocal sequences emerging and a new idea as having lasting impact on the developing play theme. In the cooperative domain, there were examples of sustained activity-related dialogue, children displaying a shared understanding of goals and dramatic scenarios linked to play themes.

Both observers were aware of a deep commitment to the play but had been unable to fully discern the preoccupying themes as the talk was quiet. We decided to chat after they had finished playing. Marie spoke to John who told her about ‘willywetpants’ and that ‘my toilet moves at home’. Marie knew from conversations with John’s mother that John was bedwetting. In conversation with Marie relating to this play earlier in the week, he had said he was playing at vampires (which they clearly were in this play, a theme introduced by John). In his previous conversation with Marie, John had said that it ‘wasn’t vampires’, as if correcting himself; he had told Marie, he ‘couldn’t talk about vampires’ and she had wondered if this censorship came from home. Marie suspected that John might be watching horror films or hearing others talk about them. His discussion with Marie lacked the spontaneity of his playful conversations with Alfie; John was anxious and, sensing his unease, Marie did not pursue the discussion.

**Post-observation reflection**

Marie remarked that the two boys had been playing with these resources throughout the week; this observation had given her deeper insights. The teddy throwing had also been previously evident but she now felt it was integral to the play theme rather than being a misuse of resources. She had previously been concerned that the boys were in conflict with each other but now understood they were bonding in play; the apparently chaotic elements (as defined from a quick glance) were part of an ongoing narrative (as evident from the extended observation). In reflecting on the conversation with John about vampires, Marie felt he was self-conscious about talking to adults. Wood (2008), drawing on Sutton-Smith (1997), reflects on the dark side of play and the case for play activities as therapeutic encounters. This may be one interpretation of the play, but Edmiston (2008) illustrates how children seek to make meaning of mythical characters and their powers in quite naturalistic ways in facilitative environments in order to come to terms with their inner fears and curiosities.
The ongoing interactions between John and Alfie seemed to have therapeutic benefits for John as well as deepening their friendship and engaging them both in challenging, goal-orientated play. Despite possible anxieties, John also showed leadership qualities.

The final vignette is drawn from observations in the reception class. Gina had introduced specific play materials. A castle was brought into the classroom and revealed some ‘object altercations’, in fact one of the most intense periods of conflict seen in Bridgehead. This vignette is used to argue that play resources are also the tools of intellectual challenge and change and, as such, object altercations may be the subliminal recognition by children of inherent cognitive potential in relation to meaning-making. Although Gina intervenes, we see the children resolving ongoing conflicts without intervention (Killen and Turiel 1991).

**Vignette 3 (reception class): Castles, houses, windows and chimneys**

**Resources:** Small world with a castle, a house, furniture, figures and plastic construction bricks all on a table.

**Agreed designation on the SPC:** Social moving to Highly Social

**Joint observation by PB and Gina, teacher in the reception class**

The observation lasted 55 minutes; one boy stayed throughout (Mark), another (Dan) stayed for some time before leaving and returning.

Within the Social domain, smiling and play noises were noted, also instruction-giving with positive responses and comment on action eliciting a response such as a look, a smile or a further comment. In the early stages of the play the two boys explored the new materials and described to each other (and perhaps to themselves) what they had found and what it could do. There was much repetitive play, going in and out of windows with play figures in a schematic way very similar to the younger nursery boys discussed earlier (Athey 1990; Nutbrown 1994). There was one sustained period of problem-solving as the two boys tried to work out where the newly discovered gate should fit. This led to reciprocal sequences and a new resource having positive impact (both Highly Social on the SPC) and, for the only time during the play, to a new idea/resource extending play and a shared understanding of goals being recorded on the SPC in the Cooperative domain. The notes record that ‘for a lot of the play they seem to look at objects and think’. They opened and closed the door, investigating how it locked. Notes record: ‘they are working together to make the chimney tall. Mark keeps saying: “It’s gonna fall”. Dan warns again of it falling and seems angry and goes to fetch an adult but returns without doing so. He does not move far from the table and watches the play before joining in again.’

From this point onwards are periods of escalating conflict. Mark held a television away from Dan. There was eye contact and Mark laughed but Dan seemed anxious. There was more pushing and holding away of the TV. Then Mark gave the TV to Dan, who snatched it quickly. The notes record: ‘The altercation seems to be about securing a high status object.’ The holding back of objects may represent an expression of power or a strong desire to retain for personal play reasons. There is smiling but anger. A hard nip is given by Dan to Mark. Gina intervenes with brief discussion. The boys seem calmer and continue playing, with eye contact, laughter and verbal exchanges.
Their play interactions seem stronger than before the altercation. They talk about a broken chair. Mark says ‘it’s time for bed’ and places the chair in the bath. Another altercation begins as Dan takes the chair without permission. Mark says: ‘He’s got two; you need to give me one.’ The chair was not given and Mark returned to his play. Mark asked again and Dan returned the chair. Mark said to Dan: ‘I’ll play with this four times and then give it to you.’ This is resonant of Hay and Ross’s work (1982) where objects become bargaining tools for social interaction. It is also indicative of situations where children prefer to resolve conflicts through negotiation rather than seek adult intervention or become aggressive (Chen 2003). At this point, Dan and Mark move briefly into the Cooperative domain as they try to solve the problem of where the gate fitted suggesting that a social interaction arising out of conflict can progress the play within their respective ZPDs.

**Post-observation reflection**

Both observers noticed how altercations were followed by Highly Social and at one time Cooperative play between Mark and Dan. There seemed to be some strong internal emotions registering on their faces during altercations and yet they seemed to want to play together. Gina remarked that they lived close to one another and perhaps played together out of school. We considered whether the altercation constituted a bonding activity alongside resolution of object location, indicating the beginnings of the capacity to negotiate. Dan had, in the previous six months, had two bereavements in his family, his mother and a close aunt, so his emotional needs were clearly high, as were his stress levels. We noticed that after the altercation Dan began to use more language/interaction in his play. We reflected on the purposes that the altercations may have served and pedagogically this suggested the significance of ensuring that there was always a good range of high-quality resources available on a regular basis (remember, this was a new play activity). In this case it was the TV and a chair at the root of the altercations, objects that would resonate with the child’s home memories and familiar environments. Gina noted that the observations had enabled her to see the value of the play despite the altercations; had she not been observing, but had only noted altercations from a distance, she may have been tempted to remove the castle as it may have appeared to be ‘causing problems’ when in fact it was assisting bonding and negotiation and some joint participation in problem-solving.

**Conclusion**

Intervention programmes might seem to address concerns regarding perceptions of poorly developed social skills and heightened conflicts amongst young children. However, this paper advocates an increase in the amount of child-initiated and child-directed play available to children in educational settings to resonate more fully with child-initiated play themes. Through the use of the SPC it also proposes that playful activity can be cognitively challenging through problem-setting and problem-solving and through complex uses of language and that often these behaviours are ‘hidden’ amongst seemingly more boisterous activity. Further, it may be the prevailing pedagogy, rather than the child’s age, that influences the potential of play to incorporate intellectual challenge. This has been illustrated in Table 1 where we see higher instances of Highly Social and Cooperative play in the younger nursery children and note their daily access to an environment where playful learning is the preferred pedagogy.
The paper has illustrated the value of extended and well-focused observations in relation to adult perceptions of what might, from just a quick glance, be defined as ‘misbehaviour, chaos and conflict’. Detailed observations and opportunities for post-observation reflection allow educators to explore the potentially multiple meanings and purposes of children’s play, just as play allows children to make meanings that can inter-connect the potentially disparate worlds of home and school. Playful pedagogues need to have a clear conceptual grasp of two dimensions of meaning-making – for the child and for the adult. Play allows children to feel appropriately powerful and to exert influences on their own lives, which is especially appropriate when children are experiencing stress. Play brings the culture of home and neighbourhood into the classroom (Brooker 2002) and this might facilitate therapeutic and familiar explorations as a basis for social skill-building leading to joint learning opportunities and friendship building.

Creating and sustaining playful learning requires a facilitative pedagogical climate and a clear understanding of the potential young children have to take control of their play, to resolve their difficulties and to intellectually engage within a community of learners. Pedagogies of interaction and intervention need to be informed by a deep understanding of the purposes and meanings of play. Let us give play back to children rather than compensating them for its loss through intervention programmes. Letting playful pedagogies lead on from children’s inner worlds and meaning-making through play in educational settings still remains a substantial pedagogical challenge.

References


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### Appendix 1. The Social Play Continuum

**THE SOCIAL PLAY CONTINUUM – OBSERVING AND UNDERSTANDING PLAYFUL LEARNING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation start time:</th>
<th>Children entering play:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area of provision:</td>
<td>Children leaving play:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation finish time:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[
L = \text{Language} \\
A = \text{Action observed} \\
L/A = \text{Language and Action Combined} \\
RL = \text{Reciprocal language} \\
RA = \text{Reciprocal Action} \\
RI/RA = \text{Reciprocal language and reciprocal action combined}
\]

#### ASSOCIATIVE DOMAIN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A:</th>
<th>Smiling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Laughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L:</td>
<td>Play noises, play voice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### SOCIAL DOMAIN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A:</th>
<th>Watches play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Imitates play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Object offered, not accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L/A:</td>
<td>Object taken, altercation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A:</th>
<th>Parallel play period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L:</td>
<td>Self-talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/L:</td>
<td>Comment on action directed at peer, peer does not respond</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### HIGHLY SOCIAL DOMAIN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RA:</th>
<th>Offering/accepting of objects evident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RA/L:</td>
<td>Eye contact/laughter, (play noise) combined as behavioural cluster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RA/RL:</td>
<td>Brief reciprocal sequences. e.g. giving/following instructions seeking/giving approval offering/accepting objects asking/answering questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RL:</td>
<td>Dialogue a mix of activity related and non-related but a theme is evident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RL:</td>
<td>Comment on own action/described intent with acknowledgement leading to exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RL:</td>
<td>Sporadic dialogue develops role play</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### COOPERATIVE DOMAIN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RA:</th>
<th>Offering and accepting verbal help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RL:</td>
<td>Explaining/descriptions utilised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RL:</td>
<td>Sustained dialogue is activity related and clear theme(s) emerge/are sustained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RL/RA:</td>
<td>New idea/material extends play and is sustained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RL/RA:</td>
<td>Children display a shared understanding of goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RL:</td>
<td>Offering and accepting physical help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RL/RA:</td>
<td>Verbal and physical help combined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RL/RA:</td>
<td>Problem identified and solved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RL/RA:</td>
<td>Dramatic scenarios enacted linked to play theme(s)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Play themes noted: ©Pat Broadhead, LeedsMet2008
### Increasing levels of reciprocity and momentum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of associative play</th>
<th>Characteristics of social play</th>
<th>Characteristics of highly social play</th>
<th>Characteristics of cooperative play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self talk does not elicit a response</td>
<td>May involve movement indoors or outdoors</td>
<td>May involve movement or one location</td>
<td>Players remain predominantly in one location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No/very little dialogue</td>
<td>Children leave and join the play at frequent intervals</td>
<td>Group relatively stable with some entering or leaving</td>
<td>Shared understanding of goal orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No/very little eye contact</td>
<td>Associative players often nearby</td>
<td>Suggestions emerge which begin to extend ongoing play</td>
<td>Players remain until goals achieved; new goals identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seemingly little regard for proximity of peers</td>
<td>Limited development of play ideas, often repetitive</td>
<td>New objects/materials brought to play but may not become integral to play</td>
<td>A highly imaginative use of ideas and materials as play themes are taken on board and explored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited periods of peer interaction</td>
<td>Limited shared understanding of goal achievement</td>
<td>Sporadic evidence of shared understandings of goal orientation</td>
<td>Players seek additional resources to extend their play themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overtures ignored</td>
<td>Dialogue does not always relate to activity</td>
<td>Role play may be evident with some combined dramatic intent</td>
<td>Role play has clear dramatic aspects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Play punctuated by periods of associative play</td>
<td>Interruptions/altermations may be evident when play returns to social</td>
<td>A relative absence of play noises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Altercations evident when play returns to social</td>
<td>Adult intervention may often be sought</td>
<td>Absorption in task with extended levels of concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult intervention may often be sought</td>
<td>Adult intervention seldom sought</td>
<td>Altercations are resolved in play as problem-solving activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments and records (e.g. information about individual children, ideas for developing area of provision in focus and associated resources, location, extensions, adult intervention, class/group discussions).

Identify play domain (including ‘moving towards’): Associative **Social** **Highly Social** **Cooperative**

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