Imagination and emotion in children's play: A cultural-historical approach

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Abstract

Interpretations of Vygotsky's texts have generally focused on the intellectual aspects of children's development, including his theory of play. This article presents a reinterpretation of Vygotsky's theory of play and draws on this theory of art to include emotions as an important part of children's play. I will argue that in play, children's motives, emotions, and feelings are closely connected with the development of imagination, fantasy, and creativity. Four main points are put forward: 1) Vygotsky's (this issue) theory of play foregrounds imagination as transformative of the relations between objects and meanings and between actions and meanings. It is important to include children's emotions and feelings in the analysis. 2) Emotions and feelings may be included by including the way imagination transforms the tensions that children expressed in play between different motive orientations towards the play theme. 3) The relations between events and feelings may become transformed through children's play so that emotions and feeling become released from events the same way that meaning in play are released from objects, actions. 4) Changes in the way children play throughout their life course have to be seen as an interaction between the institutional conditions and traditions and children's motive orientation. Therefore, the way emotions and feelings become transformed in relation to events changes through children's different life periods. These points are illustrated by drawing upon observations of children's play activity in different age periods and in different contexts.

Keywords

Play-worlds; imagination; emotion; Vygotsky; fantasy; emotional tensions

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Introduction

In the general literature on play, there is historical split in conceptualizing preschool children's play as either contributing to children's intellectual development or to their emotional development. This split is promoted through the differences in the focus of psychological approaches to play, where the emotional aspect is primarily considered in psychoanalytic Freudian approaches of play therapy (Lowenfeld, 1935/2008; Mook, 1994; Winnicot, 1977) and the cognitive approaches of Piaget and Bruner focusing on children's intellectual development (Bruner, Jolly, & Sylva, 1976; Garvey, 1977; Piaget, 1951; Sylva, Roy, & Painter, 1980). The psychoanalytical tradition focuses on the emotional perspective of the child as located in a social situation. The cognitive tradition focuses on the competence- and function-oriented approach of preparing children for school. Vygotsky's theory of play has the possibility to unite these two approaches. Unfortunately, researchers within the cultural-historical tradition have primarily focused on the cognitive approach (Bodrova, 2008; Göncü & Gaskins, 2011). Educational programs within the cultural-historical tradition have also primarily promoted the cognitive importance of play in preschool education (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, 2005; Fleer, 2010; Nicolopoulou, Barbosa de Sá, Ilgaz, & Brockmeyer, 2010; van Oers, 1999). The role of development of feelings and emotions as a central dynamic in children's play has not had the same attention, even though feelings and emotions are not completely ignored in the play literature (e.g., Fleer, 2014; Lindqvist, 2002, 2003). Lindqvist's work draws on Vygotsky's writing of drama from the *Psychology of Art* pointing out parallels of drama in art and in play (Nilsson, 2010). Fleer (2014) has extended her earlier approach and explores how the use of fairy tales and children's emotional lived experience may influence their reflective capacities in play with iPads. Neither Lindqvist nor Fleer, though, get the main point that Vygotsky put forward in *Psychology of Art*, namely that art creates tensions so that feelings may be detached from events, objects or actions. The same dynamic that Vygotsky describes in *Psychology of Art* may be found in children's play. In play, feelings and emotions may be seen in new ways because through imagination their meaning is separated from the events. In play, children's emotions and feelings are evident through the tensions they meet when their motives towards the play theme is separated from the events, as we also see when meaning in play becomes divided from objects and actions. The inspiration to argue for this relation comes both from rereading Vygotsky's different writings; about play and development of imagination in preschool age (Vygotsky, 1982, this issue); about creativity in school age and the adolescent years (Vygotsky, 1998, 2004); and his theory of art (Vygotsky, 1971); as well as my own studies of play in different activity settings (Hedegaard, 2009b; Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013). In drawing on play examples, I will illustrate how play, through children's life course, has to be seen as an interaction between the institutional conditions and traditions and children's motive orientation. However, play and creative activities in different age periods are all characterized by emotional tensions expressed in imagination or fantasy.

Imagination and transformation of meanings

In Vygotsky's theory of play (1982, this issue) children's imagination develops as a transformation of the relations between objects and meanings and between actions and meanings. A person's way of perceiving and acting is culturally connected with meaning shared by other persons. For the infant and small child, the object and actions dominates the meanings. They are united. Play is very important for children's development of imagination because through play the child starts to become able to separate the object and the meaning.

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> In play a child operates with things as having meanings, he operates with word meanings, which replace objects, and thus an emancipation of word from object occurs. Separating words from things requires a pivot in the form of another thing. The child cannot sever meaning from an object, or a word from an object, except by finding a pivot in something else, i.e., by the power of one object to steal another's name. From the moment the stick – i.e., the "other thing" – becomes the pivot for severing the meaning of "horse" from a real horse, the child makes one thing influence another in the semantic sphere. (Vygotsky, this issue, p. 14)

For young children, play themes are linked to activities they have experienced directly. To begin with, pretend play is very simple, as in the following example from a kindergarten. Louis (about three years old) asks Jorn (same age) whether they should play drinking coffee. Louis has just started in the kindergarten and is sitting together with Jorn next to a set of small plastic coffee cups. Jorn is pouring imaginary coffee into a doll cup, and then they sit side by side and are content to be together and nothing more happens until an older boy, Torben (5.5 years old), comes and asks them to enter a robber play. However, Louis and Jorn do not fully understand how to act. The two young boys cannot follow Torben's play theme. Consequently, they come together again and start to play a "parent and baby" game (Hedegaard, 2008, pp. 21–22). In Jorn and Torben's play, there is not this duality between being in a role and being outside the role directing the role. Their play has not yet become "real play" (Kratsov & Kratsova, 2010). Louis and Jorn were not able to enter or create a shared play-world by themselves. Even though they were asked by Torben to enter the Superman–robber play-world, they did not succeed. Louis and Jorn's activity was a simple domestic pretend play, which did not lead them to be oriented toward imagination. They did not distinguish between themselves being inside or outside a role (Kratsov & Kratsova, 2010), but rather, their activity can be seen as a first step in the development of imagining the world they know well. When children get more experienced, the play themes may become more complicated and the rules for how to play become more obvious—children playing together become both a director of their play as well as a player negotiating the rules so that their wishes are included.

Tension and emotions in play

Vygotsky (1982, 2004, this issue) saw the origin of play as social; it is a learned activity that starts through social interaction in a historical-societal context where children come to express motives and wishes through playing that cannot be realized immediately. Vygotsky (1982, this issue) points out that play may be seen as a form of wish[1] fulfillment, not of the specific wishes but of general wishes. Play should not be seen as necessarily limited to immediate wish fulfillment or enjoyment. Through their play activity, children start to develop imagination and creativity and learn to handle important emotional issues. The following "birthday play" between Kaisa, Fanny, and Lisa (all three are close to 4 years old) may demonstrate this. The girls' play had a domestic theme, but in contrast to the example above, was more elaborated than in Louis and Jorn's play, as a result of the tension between the girls' different motive orientations. There was a clear tension between Kaisa's and Lisa's motive orientation to organize a birthday party. The tension in negotiating the rules of how to organize a birthday party kept the play going.

The play took place through actions, which may be interpreted as imagined activity with both objects and actions. Schousboe (1993, 2013), inspired by Vygotsky, distinguishes analytically between spheres of reality and imagination in children's play, which weave into each other through a planning sphere where children go in and out of the play to negotiate the rules as they

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move in and out of the reality sphere, and this supports the transformation of the play in the imaginary sphere. These negotiations in the planning sphere may run smoothly so that less explicit discussion is needed or they can involve open negotiation in relation to children's understanding of the rules of activities (e.g., what one may and can do when celebrating a birthday). This negotiation, Schousboe claims, gradually leads to a conscious separation of fantasy and reality for the children involved in the play, but the negotiation also makes the tension between children's different motive orientations obvious. It seems that in the following play, there is a tension between Kaisa's own motive orientations, as well as between Kaisa and Lisa's motive orientations. Having observed Kaisa in the kindergarten for a couple of days, it seemed that Kaisa and Lisa were fighting for Fanny's friendship. When I observed them on two other occasions, it seemed that Kaisa did not really want to play with Lisa. Kaisa included Lisa in this play, because she needed several persons to play the birthday party game, and two other girls, that were asked, did not want to participate. In this play, it also seems that Lisa found a possibility not only to play with Kaisa and Fanny but also to position herself as central in relation to Fanny and to dominate Kaisa.

Celebration of Kaisa's birthday in the kindergarten

Kaisa starts the play by putting two small plastic chairs together, and announces she will use these as a bed, and lays down on the chairs. She pretends she is sleeping.

Kaisa then says "Hello!" and then, "I will soon be awake."

Lisa says that she must sleep a little more, so she and Fanny can prepare for her birthday.

Kaisa asks Lisa when she may be awake. Fanny answers that they just have to make the birthday cake.

Lisa finds three small plastic dishes, and says that Kaisa's birthday cake will be with three layers. Fanny takes over and says that she will start to make the icing for the cake. Lisa joins into the task of icing the cake. Both girls are sitting on a rather big tree stump making the cake. They are making the icing by sprinkling sand on top of the plastic dishes that are put together in three layers.

"Now I wake up", Kaisa says. She gets up and walks over to the tree stump where Fanny and Lisa are sitting.

Here the rules in the play are being negotiated.

"No!" says Lisa, "because you did not know it was your birthday, so we put a blanket over the cake and say that we have to clean the house." "You have to go into your bed again", Fanny continues.

Kaisa goes back to bed, and lies down on the two small plastic chairs.

Fanny announces that the icing of the cake is finished.

Kaisa gets up from the chairs and says that she may soon be awake.

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Lisa tells Kaisa to lie down in bed again and sleep a little longer so she and Fanny can finish preparing her birthday.

Fanny suggests that she is in bed at home at Fanny's place to celebrate her birthday.

Kaisa suggest that she is in her own room [which is more logical because it is Kaisa's birthday they are preparing to celebrate].

Here the play takes a new turn and is extended because Kaisa is being washed, then she gets breakfast in bed and gets some imagined play things to keep her calm. Lisa and Fanny then start to prepare the evening dinner.

While they are preparing dinner, Kaisa, for a short period, leaves her bed to play with another girl running around but then she goes back into bed. Fanny and Lisa continue to prepare the dinner for the birthday. Kaisa is back in bed. Lisa is now writing birthday invitations and sending them out.

Fanny, Lisa, and Kaisa then plan that they are going to eat dinner and view TV. The three girls start to negotiate how old Kaisa becomes. Fanny suggests 0 years, but Kaisa says this is too young. The three girls agree that she will be 1 year old.

The birthday celebration starts, but eating the cake is again postponed by Lisa's negotiation of rules.

Fanny puts the cake on the table with a stick that represents a candle; she also puts chairs around the table. Kaisa rises from the bed and takes a seat at the table. Lisa says that she is not allowed to sit at the table yet. Kaisa replies that she will just watch for a little while. Kaisa stands up again, but does not go back into bed.

Lisa says that the cake should not be on the table yet and takes it away. Instead, Fanny serves "*risalamande*". Lisa, Fanny, and Kaisa now all sit around the table. Fanny pours sand on the girls' plates.

They decide together that Kaisa must find the almond [A Christmas theme is here mixed into the birthday game. In most Danish homes, "*risalamande*" is served at the Christmas dinner containing an almond. The one who finds the almond in her portion wins a gift].

Kaisa, a little later when pretending to eat, announces with a surprised voice that she has found the almond, and that she should get the gift. Lisa says she will get the gift later. Kaisa pretends to be irritated and pushes the plates off the table [as a naughty 1-year-old child].

Finally, the birthday cake is served.

"Shall we take the birthday cake?", Lisa is asking.

"Jaaah", shouts both Kaisa and Fanny at once. Lisa sends the plates around, and they sit down at the table again.

In the birthday cake is a little stick that symbolizes a candle.

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> Fanny says it is she, who must blow out the candle because Kaisa is too young. Kaisa replies that she wants to blow out the candle and began to blow.
>
> Then she gets some imagined gifts.

Kaisa's real birthday was a high emotional event where Kaisa was the midpoint in her family's celebration, an event that Kaisa wanted to repeat in the play. Therefore, she continued participating in the birthday play even when it seemed to be boring for her waiting in bed for long periods and the emotional tensions involved in the play. Negotiating the rules from a well-known birthday setting was used to negotiate the different motive orientations of the three children. It became clear that Kaisa, in the play, could not get out of bed until all preparations were done for celebrating her birthday; in real life, the tradition is only that the birthday child has to stay in bed until breakfast is ready. This shows that the rules are remembered from the real activity, but they are negotiated and bent in the process of the play to fit with the wishes and motive orientations of the different participants.

The birthday play illustrates the self-control that children may perform in shared play, by following the rules of the game. In play, the child is always ahead of its normal daily activity (Elkonin, 1988, 2005; Vygotsky, this issue). In play, children can imagine what they cannot yet perform, and they can adhere to and self-regulate rules they find difficult to implement in daily life. What we see in this play is that Kaisa also came to transcend her feelings of boredom and irritation, which would be difficult to handle in a direct interaction; she found actions that got her back into the center of the play getting gifts and blowing out the candle.

When children acquire knowledge from literature or the media, they may become able to create a fantasy scenario that is not directly related to anything they have experienced. Children may create a play-world, often helped by adults. Lindqvist (2002) argues that, in play, the central themes in the cultural life of the adults may enter into children's play-world. In play, these themes can be found as dramatized aspects of children's play. So for instance, the themes of travel and fighting and dying, may be shared themes of children's play and adults life. The following example of two children's play fighting may illustrate how children enter a play-world, with themes found in cultural fictions, such as films, TV series, computer games, and novels that are transferred into children's play-worlds.

Play-worlds and emotional tensions

Children who start in school may be seen in a transition phase, where play activity related to the known world changes into play fantasies. In the following example of play, we see how children's fantasies come to dominate the actual objects. Because children have different motives and wishes, children have to agree to the play. They may initiate different play themes during the play before they actually succeed in their negotiations. The following play between Caroline and Martin (both just became 6 years old, and have started in school) takes place at Martin's bedroom.

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Martin and Caroline play being "attacked by robbers"

The observer, who visits Martin's home, had asked if she might sit down on a chair and watch the children play. They have said yes.

Martin and Caroline are standing up in Martin's bed. Caroline announces that the floor is water. Martin agrees. Then Caroline says a play rhyme, and this is used to determine who may choose the first object among the different toys. There are a lot of different toy weapons. Caroline wants Martin to give her a sword [his favorite sword]. Instead, he finds two foam guns and gives her one. The foam guns are flat and only just fit their feet. Martin explains that they can use them as "watercrafts". Both children then put their watercrafts on the floor (on the water) and jump upon them. The play starts with the two friends fighting against each other with different toy weapons, in between searching for new toys among the many play objects. Their play activity is rather uncoordinated, but after 15 minutes, the play takes a turn to become more of a joint activity.

Martin is on his watercraft. Caroline is also on hers, she says, she will put her watercraft on turbo and turns on an imaginary button at the back of the imagined motor craft.

Caroline: "Some have lured me out here and they attack." She then says that Martin must save her [but she does not wait for his help]. She announces that she will use her samurai sword. Then she says she will make herself invisible and fight the attackers and then these will all be killed.

She dances a little. Martin switches to another music channel on his radio.
Caroline shouts: "An attack", and asks for Martin's help. Caroline: "My personal watercraft has gone out of gas". She borrows Martin's and jumps onto it while she looks back at her attacker.

Martin: "I'm going on turbo I am running directly into the attacker." Martin jumps up in the bed and underneath his blanket [the blanket is imitation fur] and say: "They lured me to take this on and then took me as a prisoner."

Caroline: "I will hurry to take it from you, and then you have to wake up immediately, because it is poisoned. We must hurry; you should never have taken the blanket on."

Martin: "Shit it was just so nice."

Caroline: "Do you want to die or to live?"

Martin: "I just want a nap."

Caroline "So you may just find another [blanket]."

Martin: "It must be like this [the imitation fur blanket]." He is still under the blanket. "In fact, I would prefer to die," he says.

Caroline pulls him back into the play sphere, with a serious threat.

Caroline: "Shall I kill you?"

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> Martin goes out on the floor [he will obviously not be killed] and says that he will be a spy. Caroline: "But this you cannot be, because you are my brother [in the play], and it is not possible that my brother is a spy."
>
> Martin jumps up in bed and again is next to Caroline.
>
> She says, "See my sword."
>
> Martin instructs her on how she should use it. Caroline then says that Martin is her big brother. She also says that Martin's parents have been killed. So she says, "Should I be your parents?" Then says, "I'm not big enough to leave home."
>
> Martin: "But I want to be an orphan."
>
> Caroline: "But then you have to go to a children's home."
>
> They now kill enemies. Caroline announces then that Martin is killed, but she heals him. Caroline is now sitting with a lion puppet and says, "When you come in you will see it is really thick and so it becomes a skeleton that I am sitting with." She continues: "So you just say to me what have you done!"
>
> Martin heals the lion cub.

Killing and death characterizes Caroline and Martin's play. Martin, in losing his parents and the other violent fantasies described above, do not need to indicate that the two children have problems in real life. The themes of life and death and parents dying may be seen as a way to detach the feelings from the events. However, again, there are limits to how far Martin wants to join into Caroline's fantasies. He will not have that Caroline kills him, but later when she announces him dead she also heals him. Martin's lion cub (his favorite toy animal), which Caroline had turned into a skeleton, was also healed.

Fight, and the relationship between weak and strong, good and evil, and life and death were the themes that dominated Martin and Caroline's robber play. The many attackers, fire sword, samurai sword, and other things that Martin suggests, can be seen as inspired from the adult film Star Wars, which is also found in the Gameboy toy that Martin plays with. Martin's engagement in the fight may be seen as reflecting Martin's desire to be strong as a Ninja in the Gameboy games that he is very much attracted to. In the play with Caroline at the beginning, Martin suggests several times that he would like to have a sword fight with Caroline. Caroline is not eager to fight with Martin. Only when they turned the game into a shared fight against enemies, was her motive for being in close relations with Martin possible. Caroline's motive for a close relation with Martin is reflected in her suggestion that Martin should give her gifts, defend her, and be her brother. She also suggests that she may be his parent, but then the reality of these suggestions become too serious for her, and she says she is too young to leave home in order to become a parent for Martin.

Children's play in preschool age and early school age becomes the leading activity according to Vygotsky, and thereby the play motive becomes most important in this age period. This does not mean that play is the most common, but it is the most important activity for the child (Elkonin, 1988; Leontiev, 1981; Vygotsky, this issue). Children's emotional involvement in play is

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expressed through their engagement in the theme of the play. To die and be brought back to life is not unusual for children in ritualized plays. Death and healing are very common and ritualized in many robber and police games or in formalized games. The development of children's engagement and motives may be followed through the shift in play themes that dominate their play.

In popular beliefs, fantasies are seen as a special trait of young children. Young children are expected to be very imaginative. Vygotsky (2004) argues for the opposite, that young children's imagination is not as complex as older children's, because older children have had more time to experience different aspects of life both directly and through literature and other symbolic sources, and experience with reality is the foundation for the development of imagination. When children's experiences become more complex, not only does roleplay develop, but also new forms of pretend play may be found (Japiassu, 2008). Japiassu describes pretend play as a more complicated form of imagined play, where children are projecting imagined people into dolls, and where the children can switch between the different perspectives that the dolls represent.

Play, fantasy, creativity and art

The development of creativity can be seen through children's combination of aspects of reality with imagination (as in play) and on to a final point where emotions influence imagination. Through this process, subjective imagination turns into productive activity that is relevant for a person in real life. The creative character is first evident when a young person in his or her imagination is "embodying something in the concrete, constructing a new image, this is the character of fantasy" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 163). Vygotsky depicts this development as taking place at the same time as the child's intellectual reason develops. How these two processes relate to each other change through a child's development. Here, Vygotsky depicts two phases: a first phase where imagination has primacy over children's reason and children's intellectual development is subordinate to their imaginations, and a second where intellectual development has primacy over the development of imagination. For most people, the development of imagination declines, but for some people, imagination and the intellectual development continue in parallel. Vygotsky writes that this change can be followed in children's drawing activities. Only a few continue to draw when they are young adolescents, mainly those who are particularly talented or those who are encouraged to do so by external conditions, such as special drawing lessons. This is because youth start to evaluate their own production objectively. For most youth, this evaluation does not fit with how they experience the world and the aesthetic demands, and they cannot produce what they want to draw. In the transitional period for those people where imagination continues to develop, Vygotsky (2004) writes, "the imagination undergoes a profound transformation: it changes from subjective to objective" (p. 35), which means that young peoples' imagination may be externalised and is evaluated as something detached from the person.

Adolescents' fantasy is more creative than the child's fantasy. This happens because the creative character first becomes inherent in fantasy only during the transition to adolescence, where the adolescent starts to orient towards entering into the adult world. The difference between the young child and the adolescent, according to Vygotsky, is that the adolescent replaces play with fantasy. "When the child stops playing, he really rejects nothing other than seeking support in real objects. In place of play, he now fantasizes. He build castles in the air, creates what we call daydreams" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 158). What connects the young person and the adolescents' fantasy activity is that the origins are the same. Development of fantasy and creativity has the

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same origin as play in unsatisfied desires. "Unsatisfied desires are the stimulus that arouses fantasy. Our fantasy is a fulfillment of desire, a corrective for activity that is not satisfying" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 164). They also led to the same emotional result: "when we use fantasy to construct any non-real images, these are not real, but the feelings that they evoke is experienced as real" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 164). In order to correctly understand the significance of concrete factors in the adolescent's fantasy, Vygotsky wrote that creative images produced by the adolescent's fantasy fulfill the same function for him or her as an artistic work fulfills for the adult.

The focus in Vygotsky's (1971) theory of art is on the psychological aspect of creating art as a tension between reality, imagination, and emotions. Further, he argues that imagination and emotion in art only become real through relating these to the person's life, as a cultural and societal being. Art proceeds from certain live feelings, and in art, humans realise aspects of psychic tensions that find no expression in everyday life.

> Art is based upon the union of feeling and imagination. Another peculiarity of art is that, while it generates in us opposing affects, it delays (on account of the antithetic principle) the motor expression of emotions and, by making opposite impulses collide it destroys the effect of content and form, and initiates an explosive discharge of nervous energy. Cathartic of the aesthetic response is the transformation of affects, the explosive response which culminates in the discharge of emotions (p. 215).

Sincere feeling taken per se, Vygotsky (1971) wrote, cannot create art. To do this, the creative act of overcoming the feeling, resolving it, conquering it, is required. Only when this act has been performed, then art is born.

> Art is the social within us, even if a single individual performs its action, it does not mean that its essence is individual. It is quite naive and inappropriate to take the social to be collective, as with a large crowd of persons. The social also existed where there is only one person with his individual experience and tribulations (p. 249).

Art, Vygotsky writes, is the social technique of emotion, a tool of society, which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into the circle of social life. It would be more correct to say that emotion becomes personal when every one of us experiences a work of art; it becomes personal without ceasing to be social.

I have analysed young people's engagement in painting graffiti with a focus on the production of art, where I drew upon the tension between the social and the personal, and how this tension leads to the production of graffiti. It may be seen as a tension between a motive orientation to express oneself and at the same time following the demand of conformity from the graffiti community. A parallel can be found in relation to play; in play, van Oers (2013) points to the same tension for children whereby attention to the rules and overcoming the rules creates a feeling of freedom. The externalization of the tension between the motive orientation to express oneself and the demands from the youth community, in which a young person is associated, was a central characteristic found in the study of young people painting graffiti and doing street art (Hedegaard, 2014).

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Freedom to express oneself: Contra conformity

SATE is one of the first graffiti writers in Aarhus; he started at approximately 13 years of age. He denied that there was some type of revolt behind his writing; he went out to paint both because of the artistic aspect in painting graffiti and for the feeling of freedom.

> SATE: It is the feeling that you can do whatever you want, it is the total freedom to be able to go out and "get up". There is no one that controls you. This is what it is all about. The adrenalin is pumping, but it is not rebellion. There is no one who has pissed on me, and I do not have anything especially rebellious that I want to show through my graffiti. I am trying to get as much respect as possible through the hip-hop culture that is why I paint. I mostly paint at legal places but in between, I have to go out and get this adrenalin kick; this is part of the graffiti. All painters have tried to paint at illegal places. The feeling just before you go out, the excitement and expectation when you are out there, when you are in a world by yourself, where it is difficult for others to get in contact with you, and the relief you feel afterward, and a couple of days later when you go out and look at it.

From an analytic point of view, SATE's description can be seen in relation to the transcendence from being a child to becoming a young person—between being controlled by the family and school and beginning to find time and space in which he as a young person can be together with other young persons without being controlled in his activities and where he is able to demonstrate this independence by writing illegal graffiti. This struggle for independence creates a double emotion, anxiety to transcend the secure and known, and an excitement for the new and promising independence; the painting of illegal graffiti can be seen as a release of the tension between being in control and being free.

From an artistic point of view, SATE's description is close to how Vygotsky (1971) describes the artist's feeling of "catharsis", that is, the complex transformation of emotions when creating a piece of art. What is special about artistic production is that it opposes conformity, and this process of creation builds up tension that finally is released when the painting is finished. In painting graffiti, the young person takes control over his own activity. The same is happening in play the child is actively taking control over its own activity often in cooperation with other children or adults. Thereby, the union of emotion, action, and fantasy are joined in this activity and therefore play is important in its different form in all life phases.

The relation between play and learning is different in different institutional settings and thereby in different age periods

A conception of play development as naturally unfolding in a prescribed sequence is too simple according to van Oers (2013). In the classical literature, (Garvey, 1977; Piaget, 1951) different forms of play have been ascribed to different age periods: object play to the toddler, roleplay to the preschool child, and ruleplay (games) to the schoolchild. To distinguish between object-, role-, and rule-play is too simple because in play there is always some material part. This may be objects, words, or symbols, and to become play, imagination or fantasies, and procedures or rules in different ways have to be part of the play. How these aspects relate to each other depends on the institutional conditions for allowing children to play, as well as the child's experiences, competences and motives.

Vygotsky's ideas of communication and children's acquisition of meaning mediated through language and of how meaning is differentiated from the object through play is important, but his

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theory was ahistorical even though he saw the child as social. Therefore, Leontiev (2005) criticized Vygotsky for putting too much emphasis on the child's communication with other people without nuancing the conditions for communication, though he agreed with Vygotsky's proposition that the role of the environment can be discovered only through the analyses of the relation of the child to reality. To be able to conceptualize the child as an active being that not only experiences but also acts in relation to his environment, Leontiev introduced the concept of activity, thereby overcoming this problem.

Vygotsky's theory of play gives room for seeing the child as active in the reconstruction of reality and changing his or her relation to the world. Elkonin (1988) developed this part of Vygotsky's theory of play by using the concept of activity. Elkonin distinguished between the theme of the play and the content of play. The theme of the play is the part in reality that children reproduce in their play. The themes can differ widely because they reflect children's actual concrete life conditions. The themes change when a child's life conditions change, and the child becomes better acquainted with the new areas of life. The content of children's play was described by Elkonin as the child's relation to people in work and their societal life. Through several experiments, Elkonin (1988) demonstrated that if kindergarten children were taken to visit special places (i.e., the zoo or the train station), it influenced their play differently. If the pedagogues helped the children to become attentive to the activities of the people in different settings (i.e., the activity of the animal keeper in zoo or the conductor at the train) then they were able to incorporate into their play the different roles observed. The activities of the key people observed influenced the children's play, and they played these activities for longer periods than when the children were only attentive to the zoo and its animals or the train ride itself.

Parents and educators are important for drawing attention to activities through playing with children (Lindqvist, 2002, van Oers, 2013). Parents' play with children may start already with infants, with different games, such as "give and take" or "hiding and seek". Children in different developmental periods relate differently to parents' play strategies, even in the same family because they are oriented differently. The play that takes place in families among the children in different age periods has to overcome the age difference in their choice of play. In one family I researched (Hedegaard, 2009a), the mother played with her four children with an age range between 4 and 10 years. They played "hide the thimble", a game where children in different age periods can participate on equal terms together with adults. In this game, one person hides a thimble and the other seeks. The one who has hidden it screams, "it is burning", when one of the others moves close to the thimble. In this family, the father also played with the children when they were gathered at the dinner table. He mostly created word games. All four children in the family participated when he told riddles; the two older children were able to contribute to the father's language game by creating their own word games. The two youngest also participated, Emil (6 years old) also wanted to make a riddle, but he was not so successful, so instead he imitated tunes and rhymes from television programs. Kaisa (same girl as in the birthday play, 4 years old) also wanted to be in on the language games, but could not really understand what she was supposed to do; so she tried to provoke her parents by saying obscene words. There is diversity in how the children related to the play initiated by the adults, but also in how different families play with their children (see Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013).

The differences in how the children relate to parents' play are connected to their period of development and to the tradition for adults playing with children. The main point is that play, learning, and development are interwoven throughout life in different ways, and this depends on where and how play takes place: with the family in leisure time, at the dinner table, within school hours or recess, at sports, or in the street. The way children play both relates to the activity

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setting and reflects their different developmental periods. They learn to play in different ways, in different settings, being together with both children and adults; they may participate by responding or by themselves by taking an initiative to play. We have to see children's play, and what it means for their development, in relation to the broader society where children grow up. In different societies, there may be differences in cultural traditions for play settings in home and preschool programs (Rogoff, 2003). Cross-cultural aspects of children's play is not a theme in this article: for a discussion of this aspect one can turn to Faver (1999), Haight (1999), Göncü (1999), Tudge (2005), or Fleer (2014), among others.

Conclusion

Toddlers and preschool children learn to play because the traditions for practice in family homes and in day care programs in modern Western societies support this activity, where parents are oriented towards playing or giving their children conditions for play. Play is seen as important in early childhood because it gives children the possibility to engage actively and imaginatively in the world.

Roleplay and pretend play are the forms that most families and kindergartens in modern Western industrialized societies promote. Vygotsky's (2004) theory, though, gives a possibility to understand how important playfulness may also be for school-age children and for adolescents. Children's imagination and fantasy themes become extended from daily activities when they encounter literature, news in the media, or the virtual world in movies and computer games. Thereby, Vygotsky's (2004) theory of imagination and creativity in childhood can be seen as important for drawing on to integrate the imaginative aspect of play in children's school learning and to develop creativity. Further, the programs that support children to enter into imagined and explorative activities in school may also be important (e.g., Aidarova, 1982; Hedegaard & Chaiklin, 2005). In these programs, the importance of children's imagination and exploration has been promoted, but only indirectly has the emotional part through motive analyses been implemented; the excitement and tension that play may create has not been in focus. It is important to overcome the split that historically has developed in how play has been seen primarily as promoting children's intellectual development, where the emotional part has only been touched upon without being seen as important for promoting children's development into the school-age period for learning to control emotions. To draw on Vygotsky's theory of art gives the possibility to understand the emotional aspect in play. The concept of children's development of both controlling and at the same time acquiring a feeling of freedom is an aspect that is important to research further. This aspect has only been touched upon in this article in relation to adolescents (see Hedegaard, 2014) but is a dimension that would be relevant to explore further also for school children.

[1] Vygotsky's concepts of wishes and desires may be seen as a parallel to Hedegaard's (2012) concept of motive orientations. In this article motive orientation will be used instead of the terminology of desire and wish, to forground that biological desires are transformed into dynamic forces, that both contain biological aspects and cultural traditions. In addition, motive orientation is preferred instead of wish to indicate that a characteristic of a child's wish as well as motive orientation are based on an interpretation.

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