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On ‘becoming social’: collaborative free play and childhood¹

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Abstract: There is increasing concern about the well-being of children in England, and in some other places. This paper argues that evolutionary, anthropological, psychological, and philosophical perspectives can help us to understand why this is so, and suggests that declining opportunities for collaborative peer free-play and ‘discovery’ activities for children ignore important aspects of human social development.

Introduction: Collaborative free play and childhood

In England, prior to the last quarter of the twentieth century, opportunities for collaborative free play were unconsciously but routinely provided for children within local neighbourhoods inhabited by a wide circle of familiar peers and adults. The children engaged in a substantial amount of outdoor social free play, becoming increasingly independent as they entered the primary school phase, but still being casually over-seen by familiar neighbourhood adults who could administer minor on-the-spot admonishments, and take reports of serious bad behaviour back to the relevant

¹ This paper is a summary of an extended argument, which has been developed by the authors in conjunction with Dr Louise Swiniarski, Professor of Education at Salem State University in Massachusetts, and submitted for publication.

parents. Such a scene was described in Britain in 1969, by Opie and Opie who reported ‘there is no town or city known to us where street games do not flourish’ (1969, p. vi). Since then, however, out-of-school play spaces in both nations have been increasingly consumed by motor vehicles and sensational mass-media heightened adult fear of predatory stranger abduction, creating an ‘adult colonisation of children’s lives’ (Corsaro, 1997, p. 38) and a loss of time and space for children’s independent free play in the out-of-school environment (Spencer and Gee, 2011). Gray argues that modern modes of care and education for western children have, in the past fifty years, moved so far away from the natural environment in which the human species evolved, that the child population has begun to suffer ill-effects from the developmental environments that are provided for them, particularly with regard to a lack of opportunities to engage in play-based activity (Gray, 2012, p. 362). For Gray, this situation is concurrent with a rapid rise in childhood and adolescent narcissism and impulsivity, coupled with feelings of helplessness, anxiety and depression (Gray, 2012, p. 368).

There is certainly a body of evidence to bear this out. In their study of play deprivation in Romanian children, Brown and Webb reflected on the marked similarities in the behaviour of the children that they were observing to the socially disturbed behaviour of isolated juvenile monkeys studied by Suomi and Harlow (1971), suggesting that ‘we might just as easily conclude that no play makes for a very socially disturbed child’ (Brown and Webb, 2005, p. 145). In particular, Brown and Webb highlighted a clear similarity in the socially inept behaviour of both monkeys and children, including an absence of even the most mundane social rules and social hierarchies. Both samples additionally socially isolated *themselves* in ways that were entirely untypical of their respective species. Collishaw, Maughan, Goodman and Pickles (2004) carefully traced a range of concerns that have been raised relating to an

on-going increase in children's and adolescents' behavioural and emotional problems, and the increasing rate of mental illness amongst this demographic group. More recently, The Children's Society and the University of York conducted research, as a result of which they estimated that about 'half a million children in the UK in the eight to 15 age range have low well-being at any point in time' (The Children's Society, 2012, p. 5), a phrase they use to indicate deep-rooted unhappiness. In 2013 UNICEF renewed its exploration of children's sense of well-being in rich European nations, and found the UK in 16th place, still well behind the Scandinavian nations and all the Northern European nations apart from Austria, which ranked in 18th place (UNICEF, 2013). The UK emerged with some very clear indicators of stress still firmly in place; for example, high alcohol-abuse rates in young people aged between eleven and fifteen, and a low rate of further education take-up which, UNICEF suggested, may be due to a narrow emphasis on academic achievement during the school years.

Although the evidence is not conclusive (see, for example, Maughan, Collishaw, Meltzer, and Goodman, 2008), in agreement with Gray (2011; 2012), we propose that a variety of cultural changes in England have unfolded over the past half-century, resulting in rapidly decreasing opportunities for children to engage in free play and 'discovery' activities. In the English education system, the play-based teaching and learning practices traditionally offered within statutory education for children under seven are being replaced by an academic preschool curriculum, with

a growing policy emphasis on accountability, and the need to raise school standards ... [resulted in] ... a performance-oriented, transmission model of learning [being]... given preference over a sociocultural model which recognised and included the emotional and social aspects (McNess, Broadfoot, and Osborn, 2003, pp. 245–246).

Such an approach drastically reduces opportunities for children to contribute to the collaborative construction of original shared narratives through open-ended, collaborative play promoting genuine ‘discovery’ experiences (Jarvis, 2009; Layard and Dunn, 2009; Santer, Griffiths, and Goodsall, 2007; Bishop and Curtis, 2001; Reay and Wiliam, 1999). Furthermore, in England, break times in the school day for free play and associative activity have also been reduced since the advent of the ‘transmit and test’ culture. This began with a reduction of general break (or play) time during the school day in the 1990s (e.g., Pellegrini and Blatchford, 2002), followed by truncation of the lunchtime break over the early 2000s (Blatchford and Baines, 2008, p. 3).

On ‘becoming social’

This decline in ‘play time’, and the imposition of a ‘transmit and test’ approach to the curriculum’, may be leading to a decline in sociability. In studies of childhood sociability, many researchers have found that young children who are popular amongst their peers deal skilfully with the primary school playground, recognising teasing and ‘rough and tumble’ signals from other children as invitations to play. In contrast, children (particularly boys) who are rejected by their peers are far more likely to mistake such interactions for real aggression and respond in kind. Pellegrini and Blatchford (2000) concluded that, for five-and-a-half year-old boys, the amount of time spent in rough-and-tumble play [RTP] with other boys directly predicted their level of success in social problem-solving one year later. An observational study of children’s playground-based behaviour (Braza et al., 2007) concluded that engaging in RTP allows children to create complex social hierarchies, seems to reduce aggressive behaviour, and helps children to develop socio-cognitive skills (Braza et al., 2007, p. 209).

One theoretical perspective that can be used to describe human psychological factors underlying the need for a large amount of authentic social interaction during development is that offered from a cultural psychological paradigm by Moghaddam, who suggests that developmental scientists have for too long concentrated on what he calls the ‘embryonic fallacy’, characterised as ‘the assumption that as soon as life begins, the individual becomes the source of psychological experiences’ (Moghaddam, 2010, p. 466). Such a view leads to the notion of the child as a ‘self-contained individual [who is]... assumed to be the sole or main source of psychological experiences’ (Moghaddam, 2010, p. 466). In contrast to this, Moghaddam draws on some of his earlier work (Moghaddam, 2003) and work by others (e.g., Sammut, Daanen, and Sartawi, 2010) to argue that it is the understandings shared within and between cultures about social reality that develop the notion of interobjectivity, and that it is from this notion that intersubjectivity develops (p. 466). Intersubjectivity is here taken to mean how individuals understand other individuals, and ‘how individuals perceive others’ (Moghaddam, 2010, p. 466), which of course, are vital to everyday life within all human societies. Such concepts are also beginning to emerge in neuropsychology, where Hood (2012, p. ix) argues that ‘while the daily experience of our self is so familiar ... brain science shows that this sense of self is an illusion’. Hood’s central point is that the ability of human beings collectively to create a complex dynamic culture has the emergent property of each individual creating an illusionary sense of self, which is largely used as a social navigation tool; in this area of theory, the collective mind precedes and actually *produces* the existence of what we perceive as our own individual mind.

We can find a philosophical expression of this debate in the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein who, in his later writings, argued against the existence of ‘private

languages'. In the context of this paper, one important point is that 'primitive natural expressions' (Wittgenstein, *Z*, §218)* of fear, anger, joy, pain, playfulness and so on, provide the basis (Wittgenstein, *PI*, §257) for the acquisition of a first language; by training and persuasion, infants can be brought into a community of shared meanings which provide the frame of reference through which verbal language can be first acquired (Gilroy, 1996, p. 113). In any mundane, everyday context, experienced users of verbal and non-verbal language *and* infant novices see, hear, and imitate, gestures, actions, expressions, tone of voice, and the like (Wittgenstein, *OC*, §10; Wittgenstein, 1935/1968, p. 248); 'linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour are woven together into an intricate organic whole' (Pitcher, 1964, p. 240) or 'language-game' (Gilroy, 1996, p. 109). With this perspective, terms such as 'fractiousness', 'friendliness', and so on, are seen as having meaning by being used to describe certain behaviours in certain circumstances within a language-game (Wittgenstein, *Z*, §540), where a language-game consists of 'language and the actions into which it is woven' (Wittgenstein, *PI*, §7). A key point here is that children's development of language (verbal and non-verbal), in which meanings are ascribed to various verbal and non-verbal behaviours, presupposes their engagement in a range of organic, authentic, social interactions. Thus person-to-person, and face-to-face interaction, are not merely desirable or 'useful', but a fundamental prerequisite for first language acquisition (Newman, 1999).

This then sets the scene for children at a later stage of communicative development (Gilroy, 1999, p. 161) to engage in simple 'exchange' activities (described by Zeedyk (2006, p. 322) as a 'jazz duet' where each partner improvises movements, based on the feedback from the other). Such activities enable them to develop "socially-based communicative behaviours" (Gilroy, 1999, p. 161). The more complex gentle rough and tumble games with adults described by McDonald and Parke (1984) allow

them a little more flexibility of response and, by the time language proliferates, they are able to move smoothly into the rather more challenging process of ‘equal shares’ in co-operation, competition and collaboration in interaction with peers, with narrative sophistication gaining pace as the third birthday approaches. In most human societies, activities are naturally staged for children to access developmentally appropriate experiences of self-determining responses to authentic, open-ended communications.

The indications are therefore that we need to recognise that the human ability to develop and share meanings develops from organic social interactions in which children freely respond to partners with whom they are flexibly and authentically engaged in activity and related conversation; in early-mid childhood. As Bruner (1986, p. 45) concluded, human beings collectively create ‘products of the mind [and] build them into a corpus of culture’; we create our understandings of the world in the spaces *between* people rather than in separate storage areas residing *within* each individual.

The model outlined above creates a picture of a human that comes into the world in an extremely ‘unfinished’ condition. Primate species have evolved in a way that requires infants and juveniles to engage with developmentally appropriate experiences to build and then hone these complex social skills. Crucially, such experiences must be shared with others, both peers and adults. If human beings do not get these, as the most social animal on earth, it would not be surprising to see deleterious effects. As Gray reflects:

Humans are extraordinarily adaptive to changes in their living conditions, but not infinitely so. They evolved as a species in conditions in which children learned through play [so]... without play, young people fail to acquire the social and emotional skills necessary for healthy psychological development (2011, p. 444).

Conclusion: Children as social beings

The evidence outlined above collectively suggests that over the last three decades, Anglo-American society has increasingly placed children within highly artificial, adult-directed environments, initially aimed at creating a 'readiness' for the mainstream experience of immersion within rushed transmit-and-test processes erroneously presented as 'teaching and learning'. Out-of-school collaborative free play has contemporaneously reduced, being largely replaced by adult-directed pursuits and technologically mediated, consumption-based activities. However, the way that children under eight have evolved to learn is through a range of face-to-face discovery and play-based activities, in which they independently interact with others on a moment-to-moment basis, not only learning how to compete for resources and/or individual recognition for appropriate understanding/behaviour, but also how to share, collaborate and 'be social' in order to sustain shared narratives. In this way, 'natural social play may be an experience-expectation process that helps certain forms of neural maturation with benefits for the development of higher executive brain functions' (Naravaez, Panksepp, Schore, and Gleason, 2012, p. 460). We contend that recognition of the need for flexible, authentic and collaborative play-based and open 'discovery' learning activities is essential to help us to develop a modern developmental environment that can holistically nurture children's socio-cognitive capacity. As UNICEF propose:

It is through relationships with peers that children experiment with social roles and learn and practise the control of aggression, the management of conflict, the earning of respect and friendship, discussion of feelings, appreciation of diversity, and awareness of the needs and feelings of others (UNICEF, 2013, p. 11).

Note on referencing:

1. In view of the posthumous publication of much of Wittgenstein’s work, and of the translations into English, the following initials rather than dates have been used, with one exception, to refer to his work.

Abbreviation	Title	Date of writing
<i>PI</i>	<i>Philosophical Investigations</i>	1930–1949
<i>Z</i>	<i>Zettel</i>	1945–1948
<i>OC</i>	<i>On Certainty</i>	1949–1951

In each case references to sections in Wittgenstein’s work are given by the section number for example: (Wittgenstein, *PI*, §347), or the page number for the English translation, for example: (Wittgenstein, *PI*, p. 229e).

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