



Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/raol20>

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Published online: 14 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Sue Waite, Sue Rogers & Julie Evans (2013) Freedom, flow and fairness: exploring how children develop socially at school through outdoor play, Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning, 13:3, 255-276, DOI: [10.1080/14729679.2013.798590](https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2013.798590)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2013.798590>

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Freedom, flow and fairness: exploring how children develop socially at school through outdoor play

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In this article, we report on a study that sought to discover micro-level social interactions in fluid outdoor learning spaces. Our methodology was centred around the children; our methods moved with them and captured their social interactions through mobile audio-recording. We argue that our methodological approach supported access to negotiations beyond adult gaze whilst acknowledging some associated ethical and practical dilemmas. Outdoor contexts were characterised by lower levels of adult presence and control and were associated with freedom to engage in sustained inter-child play and interaction. We theorise how opportunities to practice pro-social behaviour contribute to children's social cohesion in the classroom and what adults can learn from such instances in order to support children's social development and learning. Children's conversations are analysed through conceptual lenses of cultures of play, schooling and society.

Keywords: *Play; Outdoor; Social development; Methodology; Child-directed; Culture*

Introduction

Play is a concept concerning children's 'own' activity: a voluntary, intrinsically motivated experience where the activity itself is more important than the outcome (Sandseter, Årlemalm-Hagsér, Allin, & Prince, 2012, p. 157).

This is the view expressed by Sandseter et al. (2012, p. 157) in their call for papers for this special issue on outdoor play and learning in early childhood from different cultural perspectives. A common distinguishing feature claimed for play is that it is self-directed. This characteristic makes it especially important in the context of

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different cultural perspectives on early childhood education as children's opportunities for self-direction are differentially distributed both between and within countries. For example, in the United Kingdom and the United States, where measurement against prescribed educational outcomes forms the backbone of schooling and presses downwards into early years provision, it is easy to see how opportunities for learning through play become squeezed by an emphasis on outcomes rather than activity. Outcomes-dominated classroom practices are more prevalent in cultures with performativity agendas (Ball, 2008). However, in outdoor spaces, there appears more ambiguity surrounding discourses of teaching and that ambiguity allows for more playful child-initiated learning. This, we argue, provides fertile ground for children to experiment with ways of relating to each other as outdoor spaces appear to offer a blended cultural context of play, schooling and society. We use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework to examine how culture works in these contexts. Culture can be viewed at a macro level; for example, the cultural contexts of different countries. It also operates at a meso level within countries in institutional cultures. Here we refer to cultures of schooling, play and communities. However, our study particularly zooms in to focus on some examples of how these other cultural influences permeate the micro level of children's interactions in outdoor spaces. Our aim in this article is to illustrate and theorise how these interactions unfold in outdoor contexts and help to support children's social development and ability to work together.

We begin by outlining briefly aspects of the cultural context of schooling in England where the study was conducted with reference to other schooling cultures. We then consider the role of the outdoors in supporting playful interactions and the importance of these for children's social and emotional development. The challenges of studying these phenomena that are child-created and fragile in adult-dominated contexts are then set against some advantages that innovative methods can bring. The nature of playful social interactions outdoors and some possible effects of UK schooling culture on children's interactions in and out of the classroom are illustrated with data. Finally, we consider what this might tell us about how best we can support children to become socially inclusive and responsible. We reflect on the value of 'merging' as a pedagogical approach that outdoor spaces, less dense with the culture and power of schooling, appear to facilitate.

Cultural contexts of early years schooling

Although the school starting age is set officially at five, most children in England enter the reception classes of primary schools at four. At this age they are still within the Foundation Stage (FS), which covers children from birth to five years. They move from this into the national curriculum taught phase at age five or six (Y1). As children move from FS, their learning experiences shift broadly from play-based to work-based, from active to static, from shared adult/child-led to adult-directed, from thematic to subject-based and from an emphasis on a range of skills to listening and writing (White & Sharp, 2007). Thus the children's culture of play becomes

colonised by the UK schooling norms and practices which emphasise performativity (Ball, 2008). However, more child-initiated play (Rogers & Evans, 2008) and less teacher-directed control (Waite & Davis, 2007) appear to happen outside compared to within the classroom setting.

The Effective Pre-school and Primary Education 3–11 project (Sammons et al., 2007) found that a good home-learning environment, high-quality pre-school and medium to high academically effective primary schools are key conditions for improved social/behavioural outcomes compared with children with only two, one or none of these. The power of early years provision is demonstrated by their finding that a good early home-learning environment on its own is not enough to ensure high self-regulation for children who attend poor-quality pre-school settings. On attending high-quality pre-school, caring/emotional relationships resulted in better pro-social behaviour and lower hyperactivity levels at age 10 than those children who stayed at home or attended poor settings. In particular, lower levels of antisocial behaviour and higher levels of pro-social behaviour were associated with moderate levels of expressive play in KS1 (between the ages of five and seven years). Similar benefits have been found in large studies in the United States, such as High/Scope, the Chicago Child–Parent centres and Head Start (McCabe & Frede, 2007, pp. 7–8).

These findings contrast, however, with those of a large US study (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Network, 2003) that found links between early non-maternal care and later aggressive behaviour. Sammons et al. (2007) are at pains to emphasise that primary school academic effectiveness is not associated with a negative impact on social/behavioural development as some argue that academic outcomes have been privileged at the expense of the whole child (Anning & Edwards, 1999). However, the lack of association might imply that, without concurrent development of pro-social behaviour and self-regulation in pupils, the effectiveness of schools in improving academic outcomes is likely to be compromised. Alternatively it might signify that a ‘good’ school is often good at developing both social and emotional aspects of learning and academic attainment. Pramling-Samuelsson (2006) argues that democratic pedagogical practice, where children’s views and ideas are actively incorporated, supports social development within Swedish early years classrooms. However, she acknowledges that elementary school emphasis on cognitive goals can exert a downward pressure that leads teachers to be more directive. Democratic practice is founded upon notions of the competence of children and the new sociology of childhood that shifts views of children as adults-in-waiting to social actors in their own right. Regarding young children as able to participate in their own care places different expectations upon the nature of support that adults should aim for in early childhood education (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). Nevertheless, as Edwards (2012) writing in Australia notes, developmental views of children still tend to dominate much early years practice. Outdoor contexts, however, may help support more playful learning and egalitarian management of how time is spent (Rogers & Evans, 2008; Waite, 2011). For this reason we chose to locate our study in schools that used outdoor spaces.

What does the outdoors offer to support children's 'own' activity?

Howe (2010) suggests that although schooling makes use of peer groups, gathering children into age-related teaching units, the experience for children in the classroom is largely as an individual within the group. Much research in classrooms has evidenced the prevalence of teacher-led 'Initiation, student Response and teacher Feedback' (IRF); exchanges referred to as 'traditional' by Cazden (2001). Indeed, Alexander (2001) found this form of classroom practice dominated in all five countries (the United States, Russia, France, India and England) in his comparative study.

In contrast, Nordic countries appear to be far less dominated by this form of hierarchical pedagogical practice. Aims for education and practice seem to align more closely with traditional societal values of, 'democracy, equality, freedom, and emancipation, solidarity through cooperation and compromise, and a general conception of a "good childhood"' (Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2006, p. 4). Children are seen as active social agents within the world who have rights to pursue their own interests and have their views listened to and respected rather than being viewed as adults-in-waiting who need to be protected from the world until they are socialised. Although national curricula exist in some Nordic countries, these documents do not prescribe detailed pedagogy but leave space for the carers, teachers and children to interpret how best to achieve broad aims. There is an assumption of competence and active meaning-making in play and learning, and the onus is on the adult to make sense of the child's perspective rather than the child being 'socialised' into adulthood.

In respecting the child's agenda, it is not the intention to construct an educational or care setting that resembles the 'Lord of the Flies' in allowing power to be abused by dominant children (Howe, 2010). Nevertheless, recognising and acknowledging the centrality of play in children's lives is important if adults are to meet children's rights and needs (Broadhead, 2010). Play allows children to set their own agendas, but it is liable to disruption from adult interference. For example, Waite, Davis, and Brown (2006) observed that when an adult tried to take over a game devised by children, the children drifted away. The adult's intervention was imposed upon the children's play and therefore broke the flow of their game. This illustrates how adults' orchestration of the majority of activity in schools creates a tendency for children to be observers rather than participants (or initiators) in learning (Howe, 2010) and for their social interactions to be colonised by adult agenda. Outdoor contexts in cultures that generally favour more adult-directed learning appear to disrupt the usual cultural expectations of adults and children, such that children experience more freedom to initiate their own learning experiences, to play for longer periods without interruptions and to show independence of thinking and action (Waite & Davis, 2007). Waite (2013) suggests that this may arise through a reduction of cultural density in places that are not dominated by institutional habitus. Thus, in such 'open' spaces, alternative discourses of the children's home, community or imaginative play world may come to the fore, and elide or collide with those of the school. Pedagogy that merges cultures, by being sensitively aware of what is being brought to the learning space by all parties and how cultural standpoints may interact with the aims for learning, would seem a productive way to accommodate this dynamic.

What does outdoor play support?

The extensions to the time allowed for child-directed activity when they are in outdoor contexts (Rogers & Evans, 2008) also have implications for social development. Pellegrini, Huberti, and Jones (1995) experimentally manipulated recess timing (break times) and found children, especially boys, were more socially interactive on the playground following extended play deprivation, compared with a short deprivation of recess. This increase suggests that opportunities for social interaction may be restricted in classrooms. Play outdoors does not just occur during break times in the United Kingdom; it is included in the early years foundation stage framework (Department for Education, 2012). Yet opportunities for outdoor learning in an English county were found to sharply decline from Y1 onwards (Waite, 2010). Not only does outdoor play support social interaction but, in doing so, it helps to nurture the emotional underpinning for social behaviour.

The interrelationship of social and emotional aspects of learning is described by Williams (2001, p. 1), who suggests that the social shaping of emotions is mirrored by the emotional shaping of social structure itself. Thus emotions give purpose, direction and priority to social behaviour but reside ‘not “inside” bodies, but rather actions we place in the world [. . .], feelings are social’ (McCarthy, 1989, p. 57). So feelings are acted out through our social interactions and social interactions with looser externally imposed rules (e.g. a lesser institutional cultural density) create ‘in-between’ spaces for the exercise of agency. In these ambiguous outdoor spaces, the cultures of school, home and society may collide but children have a chance to try out different ways of being. The recognition and nurture of this agency is at the core of the citizenship agenda for very young children (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). Being able to act upon the world and effect change is a fundamental element of good citizenship. Furthermore, Totterdell, Niven, and Holman (2010) have recently shown how social networks play a significant role in later life in terms of influence and success and that those networks involve complex dynamics in resisting and accepting emotional transfer.

Crossley (1998, pp. 27–28) argues that emotions, ‘make possible our conscious grip on the world. Our emotions form part of our point of view on the world; we do not just have them, we exist in and by way of them’. In this fashion, opportunities to share common interests and resolve arguments for themselves can support social development and community cohesion. Working out how to get along with others without adult arbitration is a skill that may therefore serve to strengthen social bonds and the ability to manage emotions (Ross & Rogers, 1990). Dwoskin (2003) cites Arendt’s view that thinking needs to be dialogic so that individuals, ‘can appear authentically with one another, and utilize their faculty of judgment, of conscience’ (p. 117). Yet the adoption of approaches such as ‘sustained shared thinking’ (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) may sometimes be operationalised in a way that bends the children’s line of thought to that of the adult, particularly within the performative culture of schooling. Allowing sufficient time and places for children to ‘appear authentically’ to each other through cultures of playful interaction may be equally important.

Early childhood is a key time for learning alternative responses to aggression (McCabe & Frede, 2007). Studies of play outside the classroom have shown that outdoor contexts and the types of play these engender can offer important practice grounds for negotiation (Broadhead, 2009) and socially cohesive behaviours (Ross & Rogers, 1990). As we argue above, outdoor spaces lend themselves to the study of how children naturally interact as they are less dominated by adult agendas. Our study of children's dialogue in outdoor contexts is therefore important for understanding how we can support children to be caring, socially competent and actively engaged citizens. However, researching this kind of activity presents some challenges since the absence of adult intervention is a distinguishing feature of much rich outdoor play.

Methodology that respects the fragility of play

It is well documented that the presence and intervention of adults in children's free play can alter its direction and duration (Henry, 1990; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Macintyre, 2001; Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Therefore a key problem for our study was how to capture the micro processes of unstructured free outdoor play without destroying the object of study. The apparent fragility of play influenced our methodological choices, prompting us to find ways to minimise the 'surveillance' of children's spontaneous interactions through close observations (Waite & Davis, 2007). Remaining at a distance from the play also raised methodological challenges since it then became difficult to hear and record the children's language.

Our methodological approach is built on psycho-social and socio-cultural perspectives because we were interested in both how individual children responded to play in outdoor spaces and the social and cultural influences that shaped their responses. For this reason, we used a systems framework (Neill, 2008) to take account of layered complex factors that include: in terms of what is offered, the programme and activity and the facilitator's role within those; and in terms of what is received, the culture, group and individual (Waite, Nichols, Evans, & Opie, 2009). While we recognised the powerful community of practice at work within schooling that flows through all those involved in its endeavour, we also wished to foreground the potential for and enactment of agency of the children in resisting, shaping and creating culture, especially at the micro level of analysis. Our emphasis for data collection was therefore on the 'micro level of peer relations' (Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006, p. 128) to catalogue the nature of social interactions in outdoor contexts.

The specific cultural context of our participating schools

The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council over a period of 29 months. Its aim was to consider the opportunities afforded by outdoor spaces to smooth the transition from FS to Y1. Two schools were selected by their interest in and capacity for outdoor learning provision and according to wider demographic

features, such as a mixed socio-economic profile and ethnicity in the catchment area. However, neither school had significant ethnic minority numbers on roll, in line with proportions in the population across the South West of England. Both schools had access to outdoor spaces; one school was urban and one was suburban. Each school had two reception and two Y1 classes to enable comparisons across different teachers in the same setting and across schools.

There were approximately 240 children across the eight classes in our study, but our data collection was principally centred on four target children chosen in consultation with their teachers from each of eight classrooms based on gender and teacher-assessed attainment levels (represented by assignment to working groups). These eight classes comprised two FS and two Y1 classes in each school for the first data gathering (i.e. 16 FS and 16 Y1). The 16 children in FS in the first data collection period were then followed into Y1. In total, 192 audio-recordings were captured; of these, one-quarter were less than 10 minutes long, about one-half were between 10 and 30 minutes long, and a further one-quarter were more than 30 minutes in duration. Fifteen target children (one child left the school) were followed longitudinally across the transition and we use data related to these children in the extracts included in this article. Data were gathered during three periods: the summer term 2009, the autumn term 2009 and the summer term 2010.

Methods

We employed a suite of research methods to facilitate this (Waite, Nichols, Evans, & Opie, 2009) but the method that contributes the majority of data for this paper was mobile audio-recording. This was intended to facilitate gathering naturalistic data from highly mobile children in these outdoor spaces. This formed our principal method of recording children's interactions with others as they went about their learning and play. It was intended to capture 'conversation', which Oakeshott (1962, p. 199) describes as an 'unrehearsed intellectual adventure'. The children wore small felt bags containing digital audio-recorders; hence we were able to record conversations without the necessity of adult researchers impinging on their interactions. The bags were made from brightly coloured fabric to help children remember that their voices were being recorded and that they were giving us permission to 'listen in' on their world. However, our data suggest that this awareness was not always sustained; for example, children were recorded speaking of us not knowing that they had fiddled with the recorder.

Ethical issues

Through a variety of meetings and explanatory letters about the research, we informed potential participants and obtained consent from the head teachers, staff and the majority of children and their parents in the classes of both schools. Those who were not willing to be involved in the research were not disadvantaged by their

non-participation and no data relating to them were used in the analysis. We took a great deal of care in thinking through the ethical implications for this method. The bright colour was chosen so that, although the bags needed to be comfortable to wear, the children would remain conscious that they were taking part in the research when they wore them. Inevitably there was some tension between this and the reminders that the researcher regularly gave before giving them to children and our desire in the research to gain access to children's private worlds. Occasionally it was clear that children had not always understood that their voices would be captured even when no adult was present; at other times, the bags themselves were the focus of conversation for children. We were also surprised by the status that the bags conferred and we adapted our original intention that only target children would wear them to include more children (who had given their own and parental consent). In the event, only about 40% of recordings were our target children. However, there were ethical issues in disappointing some children who wished to be involved but did not have their parents' approval to participate. For this reason, these children were allowed to wear the recorders but either the recorder was not turned on or the recording was immediately deleted and not represented in the data.

Analysis

The microanalysis of children's dialogue as they went about their daily lives at school allowed us to listen to the processes that inform alliances and tensions within very young children's interactions. The full dataset was very large and we used the following systems to sample from within it. We selected a subset of data across the transition from the target children in the FS classes in the first year of the project and then the same children in Y1 of the second year as this is relevant to our original research questions and the primary focus for our study. The audio files for transcription were selected according to the following criteria: target children, lesson times not break times, each of the three terms in which data were collected, the longest recordings available, and at least three outdoor recordings and one indoor recording per child. This subset was fully transcribed by two research assistants who did a first cut inductive content analysis, generating codes through content analysis using NVivo. Emergent codes generated were compared and combined into grouped codes through discussions between four members of the research team. The principal investigator and two co-investigators were also assigned different sections of the data so that all transcriptions and initial coding were read by at least two researchers to check the validity of the coding and in order to become familiar with the data. The subset was contextualised within an overview of all recordings, which was undertaken by another research assistant who listened to the complete set of audio-recordings and compiled a spreadsheet of information about their content including types of play, interactions and details of their audibility.

As a team of six, we brought different perspectives, backgrounds and interests to the research, which we found beneficial in troubling taken-for-granted assumptions. One researcher used to be an early years teacher, another a former primary teacher with an English and psychology degree, while another previously worked in health and is now

a lecturer in sociology. Steiner-Waldorf education, cultural studies and sociological perspectives on disability and inclusion were also represented. Thus multiple strands of disciplinary and cultural perspectives are woven through our interpretations of the data.

In the following sections, we offer extracts from the data with an interpretive commentary to illustrate the ways in which children play with social identities and theorise how cultural influences permeate and penetrate the captured conversations. Although our focus is principally on outdoor contexts and the child's perspective through the audio-recording method, we contextualise this with a recording of group work in the classroom, which exemplifies some aspects of the culture of UK schooling and its effects on inter-child dialogue, and an extract from staff interview data.

'The way we do things here'—a socio-cultural lens

Firstly we consider an extract recorded inside a Y1 classroom in order to set the scene for the culture of schooling in this study. The children are inside the classroom and have been making a joint collage in a group, although they are working as individuals rather than collaboratively. This is a common pattern noted by Howe (2010). The proceeding conversation marks the beginning of a tussle for control between members of the group. Some wish to be independent and creative in the colours and content of their picture, but one child in particular is focused on generating a product that conforms more to their brief and will please the teacher. This leads to conflict between the peers that one child attempts to resolve by appealing to adult authority.

Year 1, School B, summer term 2009 (inside the classroom)

'We need to show Mrs Benson.'	<i>The frame of reference is adult approval.</i>
'Hold it. Whoah! Hold it!'	<i>The children's fractiousness continues.</i>
'I can't'	
'I need to hold it'	
'Wait'	
'No not you. You're the only two' [The girl names two children, as well as herself—she is clearly taking charge].	<i>A child takes charge and creates in-group.</i>
'No, nooo! You've broken it.'	<i>But she does not have assent of others.</i>
'Now you've broken it, Bea. Thank you.'	<i>The shared product is damaged.</i>
'It's your fault. You didn't let me hold it.'	<i>Dispute continues about blame.</i>
'Bea has broken it.'	<i>Appeal for judgement.</i>
Bea declares: 'Noooo, she wouldn't let me hold it.'	<i>Denial.</i>
'Bea! Let go! You're tipping all the things off'	
[Mrs Benson walks over and declares:] 'Cor, you're all ignoring me, aren't you?'	<i>Notes children's different discourse.</i>
[She then prompts others to] 'put all the chairs in and pick up all the paper. Tidy up.'	<i>Reiterates classroom norm 'tidy-up time'.</i>

A socio-cultural lens would suggest that children may have picked up on discourses of formality from the patterns of interaction in the school. Adults model ways of interacting that involve formal requests to children with the expectation of agreement without negotiation. Thus some children may begin to adopt these practices in their own peer interactions as they do not experience equality of power relations between adult and child that they might in more democratic pedagogic settings (Pramling-Samuelsson, 2006). However, we suggest that different norms predominate in outdoor contexts away from the surveillance of adults and are characterised by freedom for children to try out different ways of being. This different culture may make the formality and focus of interactions used in classrooms unfit for their purpose outside. Later sections of this article demonstrate how using cultures of schooling in outdoor contexts appears to be less effective. At times when this peer-mediated culture surfaces in the classroom, the adult may recognise that her authority is not operating yet reiterate instructions rather than accommodating the content of children's debate. Accommodation would signal a respect for the children's agenda. The cross-cutting of the focus of their heated debate with the schooling refrain of 'tidy-up time' seems to indicate that the movement through the school day rather than the task itself was important. Indeed, the lack of comment on their angry interchange or the product of their endeavours is likely to add to the children's uncertainty about the purpose of their task and has done little to support children's ability to sort out disagreements independently.

At other times, teachers elicit talk about appropriate behaviour explicitly with children but this is mostly about not 'showing up' the school or for safety reasons. In another example of the culture of schooling being taken outside, the children are coached in class about appropriate behaviour before they leave the school, although little detail is given about the purpose of the visit to a local park for their learning. They are therefore confused about their task related to forces in a community park, which is associated in their minds with play and different cultural expectations of behaviour (Waite & Pratt, 2011). Thus the school discourse is often about making sure that permissions and imposed rules are regarded, even though the ability to get on together is valued by teachers and mentioned by them as a rationale for outdoor play and learning. Nevertheless, care for others and the development of personal responsibility are also modelled implicitly by some teachers and adults.

Modelling offers a different approach to pedagogy for affective and behavioural issues. Democratic schooling would aim to develop these social skills through demonstrating respect and egalitarian attitudes rather than just telling children how to behave towards each other. In the following extract, taken from field notes of an observation of a class trip to the zoo, a parent helper models care for others and both demonstrates and praises contingently kind actions. The zoo is some distance from the school, and children have arrived by coach, carrying their lunches in bags with extra helpers accompanying the teachers to supervise the groups of children. The zoo is a new place for many but the organising teacher is very familiar with the physical layout from her own childhood and other visits.

Year 1, School A, summer term 2010

The adult asks a child if she would like to take some stuff out of a bag and put it in her bag. The adult asks about a child's lunch. She then says that the child is very kind to carry somebody else's bag/bag contents.

The adult swaps objects from the bag of a child to her own bag (lightening the load for the child)

The target child's group stops. The contents of bags are exchanged. The owner of the bag with the hole in wears the bag with nothing in it. The adult carries the contents.

In one sense, this active helping is an alternative way to try to inculcate social skills by modelling rather than telling children how to behave to each other. From another perspective, this action could be seen as removing the agency of the child who had spontaneously helped another child to carry their belongings because their bag was broken. Freedom can take different forms; freedom from the burden of carrying a heavily laden bag; freedom for children to solve a problem themselves. The teacher leading this school trip had a more robust attitude to the children's self-reliance, advising another helper that the children would look out for the adult to keep the group together rather than the adult leader having to be constantly watching and corralling them. This suggests a greater belief in the agency and competence of the children than the societal norm in the United Kingdom at present, which tends to be characterised by a fear of risk (Furedi, 2001). Her relationship to the children assumed that they would show responsibility for themselves and others without it having to be constantly made explicit. She created a sub-culture in her class of children that expected them to behave responsibly and kindly, and she valued the outdoors for providing room for these to be practised:

Like I say a foundation child doesn't suddenly turn into a Year 1 over a six week holiday, so I think they need to keep up that kind of practice and the outside is one of the best places for those social skills. In the classroom you are not far away so you are pretty much always monitoring what they are doing. Whereas outside they could be round a corner, there's more social issues to deal with on their own whereas in the classroom you are there to support them pretty much all the time (Y1 teacher, School A, 28 January 2010).

The effectiveness of tacit forms of cultural influence is also apparent in the next section.

Merging and emerging—social identification through play narratives

In this extract, Kane and a friend are sharing a game that involves sorting animals as part of a bigger play narrative. Their play is loudly accompanied by farmyard noises, which would be unacceptable in the classroom as it might disturb other activities. Thus the space outside the classroom enables a different way of relating to each other and sharing their play. They rarely ask questions of each other but the statements they make and the soundtrack of their play indicate the turns that their game is taking. This leads to sustained involvement in the play, to the extent that they are oblivious when

it comes to tidying up time. Such high levels of engagement or ‘flow’ have been linked to deep learning (Czisentmihalyi, 2000; Pascal, Bertram, Mould, & Hall, 1998).

Year 1, School A, summer term 2010

Kane says: ‘Moooo’	<i>The children are playing with farm animals.</i>
He then says: ‘Hey! That cow should be in the cow yard.’	<i>Grouping like with like.</i>
Another boy is making animal noises. He does not say ‘moo’ like the target child, but he does make a deep-throated groan that resembles the sound of a cow.	<i>Sounds weave together the play of the two boys.</i>
Kane says: ‘C’mon, I need a hammer, hammer, hammer . . .’	<i>There are banging noises as there are also construction tools available outside.</i>
The boy replies: ‘Oh.’	
Kane then says: ‘He’s dead.’	<i>The elision of different play resources to support a chosen play theme.</i>
Kane adds: ‘You put that one down in there, and I’ll pick him up.’	
The boy says: ‘Oh no! He shouldn’t be there.’	<i>Shared rules about sorting of animals.</i>
The boy makes more cow noises.	<i>Moo—soundtrack of this play narrative.</i>
Kane says: ‘He’s with the cows, look!’	<i>A rogue goat is introduced. Transgression of rules can be stimulating. The children are so engrossed in their play about in-group and out-groups for animals that they do not stop to tidy up. The narrative is curtailed by the close scheduling of activity in school.</i>

The content of their play is interesting too as it deals with sorting and grouping according to sameness and difference. This sorting is a regular in-class curriculum activity for early mathematics skill development, using bugs made from coloured plastic, for example. It is possible that the children’s play reflects the rural county in which their city is located. We found that sameness and difference is a very common discourse arising from the children’s own interests in the outdoor spaces. In class, this sorting would be considered a mathematics activity and would be conducted fairly quietly or be liable to interruption by adults. However, in the outdoor tarmacked area outside their classroom, it bonds the two boys in an activity where they learn to share, be together in play, experiment with rule making and experience flow; all indicative of socially cohesive behaviours (Ross & Rogers, 1990). Furthermore, when they are outside the classroom children actively sort not simply objects but also themselves or others to certain groups, as we illustrate below.

In the following extract we see how comparisons of sameness and difference between children worked in creating and managing cohesive groups for play in the FS outdoor area of the school. The enclosed area just outside the classroom has some green space and trees. Immediately before the following section, children have

been discussing school rules regarding tree climbing and one child retorts that it does not matter because the adult is not outside. This demonstrates one of the negative aspects of socialisation of a child to school norms because if they are not internalised and shared they do not sustainably affect behaviour. In a similar way, one could argue that a lack of ownership of the agenda in class may reduce the learning potential for children (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). The strong desire to be part of a peer group is evident below from their conversations and they are adept at emphasising uniformity to form allegiances.

Foundation Stage, School B, summer term 2009

Amber: You care for me and my name is Bubbles.

Care is a common feature of play.

Amber: Yeah I'm the cat actually.

As are animals.

Bonny: Shall we be cats?

The children assign family roles from their experience.

Amber: yeah and, and I'm the mummy cat.

Bonny [disappointed]: Oooh? Can we be two kittens?

But sometimes greater parity of status is sought. Here Bonny suggests both should be young cats.

Amber: Yeah {unclear} and I'm called Bubbles and we're both called Bubbles, but I'm called Bubbles Lara and your other name is Bubbles Tara [both children say Tara at the same time].

This similarity is developed by Amber who decides they will have the same name. The increasing shared play narrative is illustrated by the synchronised speech.

Bonny: My name is Bubbles.

The bond is reinforced by repetition.

Amber: And we're sisters, yeah?

The parity is further cemented by a different family bond.

There is then a reframing of play so that a child who does not want to be a kitten is the mummy cat, whose role is to cheer on Amber in the race. She wins!

Amber: And I be, and we're both be Ariels.

The play narrative changes course.

Bonny: And, but have we got mermaid tails?

Amber: Yeah.

Bonny: Yeah mum and dad mum and dad Ariel tails and I had a blue, I had a different colour tail. I have a bright blue tail.

A difference is suggested to distinguish the baby in the family.

Amber: We have the same tails yeah?

But the principle of uniformity for bonding is stronger.

Note also how in the language used here there is constant augmentation of the narrative by the use of 'and' at the start of many statements so it is clear that it is building on the former, and the exchange of 'yeah?', 'yeah' to confirm affirmation. The narratives that follow this flow of merging strategies for maintaining play appear to lead to extended play except when externally disrupted by tidying up, for example. These successful narratives extend play and maintain flow, leading to deep engagement and shared experience for social and learning outcomes. In the next section we see how

the flow can be interrupted when children use less playful approaches. This suggests that taking some learning outside the classroom may have continuing value beyond the FS to enable sustained narratives supporting thinking and different pedagogical relationships between children and adults (Waite & Davis, 2007).

Have we been formally introduced? Interruptions of flow

One aspect that emerges in the interactions in outdoor spaces is how combination into groups and inclusion in a genuine way with play scenarios are often less successfully managed if approaches are formal, as is commonly the practice inside classrooms. Teachers expect answers to their questions, and they also expect children to include others if they ask politely. Many homes would also reinforce this discourse of inclusion ‘if you ask nicely’. Yet, as we see in the following extract, these rules of politeness and permission can also be used to wield power. This power reflects the implicit norms of the classroom; that it is the teacher who asks questions and will usually obtain response, as we have discussed earlier in relation to IRF. As we saw in the first data extract inside the classroom, children in Y1 are already socialised into some expectations of schooling. Asymmetrical power relationships are part of the repertoire of children outside too and sometimes seem to be a trial of adult rules of engagement. More balanced power relationships seem to be less formalised and arise through the process of merging. Although there may be a leader or initiator of a play theme, its continuance and success in a group is dependent on negotiation of a shared vision (Broadhead, 2009).

Year 1, School A, autumn term 2009

After several minutes of silence from Kelly but much shouting from the others, she says: ‘You have to ask me if you want to play.’
A girl replies: ‘Can I play?’
Kelly: ‘Of course you can.’
Another girl asks: ‘Is that a cake?’
Kelly says: ‘You have to ask me if you want to play.’
Another minute passes. Kelly says something about a pancake. Close by, somebody says: ‘You are not allowed!’ Another minute passes. Kelly repeatedly says: ‘Jam, jam, jam, jam . . .’
She then declares: ‘If you want to play, you have to ask.’
To the boy she is playing with, the target child, she says: ‘Now, put it in the freezer.’
An adult speaks up: ‘Erm, girls, can I ask you all to take them out of the bag please and put them in the box. Out of the bag, back into the box. Right.’

The ‘rule’ is that permission to join a game is made.
The ritual is followed.
And the expected response given.
An attempt at a ‘merging’ strategy for play.
The rule is given but not followed up.
It appears that Kelly is busy with individual play and that the access to play negotiated is not to shared narrative but common space and resources.
The ‘rule’ is repeated.
The narrative is briefly shared.
The narrative is interrupted by an adult management issue and external rule about where the resources should be kept or used.

As we see from the final remark by the adult, the request is given politely but with a level of certainty that the requested action will happen. Yet in the earlier peer exchange, this strategy is less effective in gaining access to play with the kitchen toys. The repeated request is ignored, despite the rule being reiterated that to participate one must ask permission. One child uses a partial ‘merging’ strategy by asking if it is a cake, so that she can begin to play alongside before inclusion in the play narrative. It is interesting in this formal exchange that Kelly, who wields power of veto in this extract, sometimes experiences difficulties herself when trying to gain access to play. This might indicate that it is only through the development of socially adept practice by the children themselves that it will become habitual and embedded. This practice of social skills was a rationale for continued outdoor play given by one of the Y1 teachers, quoted earlier in the paper. Furthermore, this extract illustrates the difficulties there are in building a shared narrative if there are disjunctions and interruptions to the flow of play. This has implications for the sensitive role of adults in their support of play and learning (Rogers & Evans, 2008).

In the example below, the skill of merging to redirect or join in play is not mastered. Kelly is now in a position of trying to gain access but she focuses more on objects of play and the fact of playing or not, while Bobby uses a merging strategy to build a shared play narrative.

Year 1, School A, summer term 2010

Kelly says: ‘Jay, can I have that man?’	<i>Formal request for parts.</i>
Jay replies: ‘No.’	<i>Refusal.</i>
Kelly asks again: ‘Can I?’	<i>Repetition—persistence.</i>
Jay says: ‘No {unclear—“No sis?”}.’	<i>Continued refusal.</i>
[More rummaging]	
Kelly then asks: ‘Can I have that, Bobby?’	
[. . .]	<i>Parallel play continues with requests for parts.</i>
Bobby: ‘That’s a water building’	<i>Invitation to shared scenario (merging strategy).</i>
Jay: ‘I’m not playing.’	<i>It is not clear if this is in response to a disagreement about a shared construction.</i>
Kelly asks: ‘Why?’	
Unclear response from Jay. {‘Because it’s too big?’}	
Kelly persists: ‘But why aren’t you playing?’	<i>Focus on act rather than subject of play.</i>
Leigh asks loudly: ‘Can I plaaaay?’	<i>Formal request.</i>
Jay: ‘Maybe.’	<i>Qualified positive response to request.</i>
Kelly [shouting out]: ‘Laurie, can you make a scooter?’	<i>Access through play.</i>
Bobby is making ‘beeping’ sounds. {Scooter horn?}	<i>Sound as narrative ‘glue’.</i>
Kelly: ‘May I take this out?’	<i>Formal request.</i>
Bobby: ‘You better not.’	<i>His decision = power.</i>

In this example of construction play on the tarmacked outdoor area outside the classroom, where children are playing with Duplo, it is the access to objects and building that is more prominent than a narrative that can build cohesion between the children. They play in a very loose group that falters with formal requests and truces and contains undercurrents of power and belonging. Bobby seems to be in charge of access to resources, while Jay also controls access to play. Leigh and Kelly seem to be supplicants. How best might this re-enactment by children of the power flows experienced in classrooms between adults and children be troubled? How might more socially inclusive attitudes and behaviour be encouraged? Perhaps the answer lies in activity rather than the discourse. As the opening quote suggests, play is activity and behaviour rather than the conversation that may accompany it. Our extracts describe activity drawn from our other data collection methods as well as the words that are uttered. Ailwood (2003) critiques three dominant discourses of play (the romantic/nostalgic, the play characteristics and the developmental) to illustrate how it is governed and managed in early childhood education. However, she cites Romero (1991) who suggests that children have an alternative discourse of play that resists and subverts organisation of their play and work to incorporate their interests (Ailwood, 2003, p. 294). Both children and adults may better support learning and social development by participation in activity rather than by commentary on action. It may be in the example given here that an adult joining in the children's play and modelling ways to share and co-construct (in effect, merging with the children's play scenario) would have resulted in a better learning experience.

Fair play?

Our interest in social interactions outside adult gaze and methodology to capture these also raised issues regarding the penetration of unacceptable cultural attitudes. While children may be competent to negotiate many social interactions independently, they may also have picked up cultural values that are at odds with those of a democratic and liberal society. The presence of flows of power means that freedom of expression of some can lead to restriction for others.

In one observation, there was wild play with small pockets of quietness in the tarmacked and grassy outdoor space outside the Y1 classrooms in School A. A large group of mainly boys were swarming in and over a tunnel while a stick was being poked into the holes by Kelly. This hazardous behaviour was periodically reprimanded by adults briefly emerging from the classrooms, but amongst this general boisterousness some bullying also began. Mario was playing with the doll's house with a serious and engaged expression and with his back to the frantic physical rough and tumble behind him. He was not seeking entry to that group and had in effect created a place, a pocket of quietness within the mayhem. Nevertheless, one child began chanting 'Mario is a gaylord' repeatedly and others began to join in. Mario ignored them at first, seeming to try and keep his attention on the play he was enjoying, but eventually he stood up and approached the boy and shouted loudly 'Just stop it!' The chant

began again and Mario shouted for them to stop but eventually he moved away. This exemplifies how cultures may collide in places where there is ambiguity. The 'freedom' that one child experiences in being able to express homophobic attitudes that may be regarded as acceptable in other places he knows arises in an area with less school surveillance. This freedom is in stark contrast to his attempted restriction on Mario to conform to gendered play. Yet Mario's crossing of boundaries of stereotypically gendered play resources affords him sufficient pleasure to resist bullying for a time and keep playing. Leaving homophobic attitudes unchecked is not an option but it is difficult to deal with them without being present to re-direct and question contingently. The emotional impact of these othering behaviours could be exacerbated by only tackling issues after the event and needs very sensitive handling. De Palma and Atkinson (2009, pp. 851–852) suggest that it is through 'small acts of resistance' that we can, 'not only [. . .] understand the processes of heteronormativity within primary schools, but [. . .] develop effective means of challenging it'. This implies an active engagement with issues with awareness of other cultural influences and acting from within the cultural context to challenge norms.

Possible benefits (and risks) of freedom for fairness

Children's interactions reveal shared interests in popular culture and familial relations and show informal ways of merging and emerging shared ways of thinking. Such activity offers promising opportunities for children to try out different ways of being with each other. However, there are dangers inherent in this, which social identity theory may help to explicate. Social cohesion is often established through the inclusion of some within a group defined by a role (e.g. cats or sisters, mummy and child) but sometimes the dominant group is delineated by the exclusion of others. So we have heard girls and boys separate into play groups by gender and a girl asking to 'be a boy' in order to gain access to a desired play theme. This is another aspect of outdoor play that enables occasional transgression of expected roles so that other identities can be tried out. Several sequences show that children create bonds through emphasising sameness in the together language of 'we'. This poses the risk that it is only possible to forge bonds with those that are like us. What seems to be most effective and sustaining is when children create cohesive groups through a shared interest (Dwoskin, 2003). Often such play foci are not explicitly narrated until the flow of the game is established. Interestingly one of the ways that this seems to occur is through the soundtrack of play; animal sounds, screaming, shouting, drumming and humming. These appear to cement play narratives without the need to formally explain what is happening at every step. Indeed, asking questions can rather interrupt the flow of common feeling. The role of adults in this flow requires sensitivity to merge with activity to guide and support learning and social development, modelling fairness and justice without creating artificial formulaic responses from a position of power.

Possible educational implications

Proposals for greater integration across the curriculum and smoother continuity between early years and primary (elementary) education (Rose, 2009) have stalled in the United Kingdom following the election of the coalition government in 2010, making robust evidencing of possible benefits of extended play-based learning through education outside the classroom even more crucial. Similar tensions underpin practice in other countries such as the United States, where balancing play-based pedagogies and the demand for high-stakes testing creates a dilemma for teachers (Rogers, 2011).

This research demonstrates some of the benefits that accrue from permitting greater freedom to engage in play-based learning for a longer period than is currently available to children in the English system. Children's ability to develop shared scenarios and maintain group cohesion through adapting their behaviour and self-regulating emotions and actions are signs of the cohesion that can be constructed through a common focus of interest. The relatively less successful formulaic approaches to inclusion within a group employed by Kelly, for example, also suggest that a pedagogy for developing social skills cannot be simply taught but has to be 'caught' to a large extent (Craig, 2007). Thus modelling ways of interacting and allowing children space to try out different ways of being are vital if respectful and emotionally literate patterns of interaction are to be developed. The importance of finding common ground is demonstrated in the examples given of merging with others' play. This finding and the conversation in the classroom also suggest that pedagogical opportunities to enhance learning contingently are often missed when the focus is on the *performance* of the task (be it play or work) rather than the task's *content and purpose*.

Blending desired learning outcomes with children's interests and the cultural contexts that they import might help to smooth the transition between child-led and adult-directed learning as children move into primary school. The demand on children to adapt to the school culture is challenging when the cultures of home and school are radically different. However, it is important to recognise that this space and freedom can also bring risks. In some of the spaces with low adult surveillance we also observed social identity theory at work in examples of bullying, the cohesion of the in-group being strengthened by ostracising children as in the example of Mario above. Cultural attitudes from beyond the school, left unmediated, can potentially reinforce negative stereotypical attitudes. Here lies a role for sensitive pedagogical interventions that support 'learning that disrupts and challenges the individual's discursive locations within discourses relating to difference' (Robinson, 2005, p. 176).

Yet perhaps we, as adults, can also learn from the interaction between children how such attitudes can be successfully challenged. We need to support children to question these views not possibly drive them underground through an official reprimand. As Maxine Greene (2000, p. 273) suggests: 'the creation of communities in classrooms may be one of the most difficult and yet the most essential undertakings in the schools of the future'. The many voices in the social interactions we have recorded and analysed offer hope for social imaginings that are inclusive of children's multiple

viewpoints. The challenge for practitioners is to use such insights to blend rather than bulldoze new ways of thinking. Merging as an inherently social constructivist strategy has much to recommend it for our pedagogy as well as in children's independent play.

Acknowledgements

This article is based upon a study funded through an award by the Research Council UK funding body, the Economic and Social Research Council, to Sue Waite, Julie Evans and Sue Rogers, entitled 'Opportunities Afforded by the Outdoors for Alternative Pedagogies in the Transition between Foundation Stage and Year 1' (award number RES-000-22-3065, January 2009 to May 2011). It draws on a conference paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Conference, 8–12 April 2011 in New Orleans, LA, USA.

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