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Rough-and-tumble play among children six year-olds: Adult role.

Abstract

This presentation builds on previous work begun in 1997 when I studied play in three classes in lower primary school in Norway. Rough-and-tumble play had special interest with the research questions:

What does rough-and-tumble (R&T) play mean to the children?

In what ways do adults encourage rough-and-tumble play?

I collected information by using observations and interviews with the teachers. Data was analysed using phenomenological - hermeneutic method. Results include clear gender differences. Especially the boys chose R&T play and enjoy catching each other, play fighting, and challenging their strength and plasticity with each other. Results also showed that most teachers ignore or try to stop or forbid R&T play for several reasons: (1) Difficult to see this noisy activity as play; (2) The moral opinion; (3) Conflicts; (4) Fear for losing the control; (5) Fear for injuries; (6) Knowledge about the value of R&T for children's social learning and for subjects in school

Traditionally adults have not encouraged R&T play. My new work aims to increase knowledge about benefits of R&T play in order to change the attitude among the adults. Two classes in lower primary school are followed for an additional period of one year to cast further light on area of play and education.

Background

Norway has got the most "playful" National Curriculum in Europe for the 6-10 year-olds (Trageton 1999). In the new school reform (L97) play shall have a dominating place for the whole lower primary school (6-10 years). Lillemyr (1998:20) categorizes different play in this way:

- 1) Sensomotoric play or functional play, especially existing the first two years of life
- 2) Constructional play (experiments with objects, building with bricks and so on)
- 3) Role play, which develops towards dramatic play
- 4) Rule play (where the rules are central)
- 5) Play with movements and rough-and-tumble play (especially among the 6 – 15 year-olds), often rooted in integration of senses and the need for motor activity

In my study I observed all these categories of play among the six year-olds. After a while rough-and-tumble play (in the following just called R&T for short) became of special interest. This play was of very great present interest for the children. Besides, I did not find much literature about R&T. Through his categorization Lillemyr shows that movement and body is an important part of play for older children, as well. Besides, he places play with movements and R&T on the same foot. In most play literature R&T mainly appears as an under category of physical activity play (Johnsen, Christie & Yawkey 1999, Pellegrini & Smith 1998).

In children's play we can observe that the categories of play are not clearly separated from each other. In my study I wanted to categorize in a way that caught the most characteristic feature of the play. R&T can contain both movements, constructions, roles and rules, but the movement is the most prominent feature of the play.

It is important to define R&T. Blurton Jones (1978) describes R&T through seven movement patterns. These are:

“Running, chasing and fleeing; wrestling; jumping up and down with both feet together (“jumps”), beating at each other with an open hand without actually hitting (“open beat”); beating at each other with an object but not hitting; laughing. In addition, falling seems to be regular part of this behaviour, and if there is anything soft to land on children spend much time throwing themselves and each other on it” (Blurton Jones 1978:355).

Rasmussen (1992) is inspired by Merleau-Ponty (Rasmussen 1996), the philosopher of the body, and has been talking about order and disorder in play. Order in play is characterised by a minimum of controversy and struggle. Disorder is characterised by confusion, joy, thoughtlessness, bodies in motion, display of power and intensity.

Research questions

1. What does rough-and-tumble (R&T) mean to the children?
2. In what ways do adults encourage rough-and-tumble play?

Methods

I collected information through field studies by using observations of the children’s play and the adult role. I spent ten days in each of the three classes with totally 59 children (a weak predominance of boys), four main teachers and two assistants. I interviewed the four main teachers. Data were analysed by using phenomenological – hermeneutic method.

What does rough-and-tumble (R&T) mean to the children?

Buytendijk (1933) is talking about the childlike behaviour which is characterised by (1) movement without a definite direction, (2) the need for movement, and (3) a playful attitude to what is happening here and now. According to R&T the children’s need for movement as we observe it in school, is of special interest.

Buytendijk (1933) is also talking about *amplitude* in play. *Amplitude* means the distance between tension (disorder) and relaxation (order). In play the children must balance these points to each other. Too great tension will turn play into seriousness. Too great relaxation will destroy the play because it becomes boring and predictable.

Merleau – Ponty (1962) is called the philosopher of the body. His theory stands in sharp contrast with the dualistic division between body and thinking/recognition. According to Merleau – Ponty it is through our bodies we are present in the world and come in contact with the things and the world. The children make experience through their senses. Without these experience they are not able to exist as reflected human beings. The body is the centre for all reflection. The body is our first instance of understanding. We must have experience to be able to understand, analyse and evaluate our experience. Our senses co-operate and communicate with each other. All the separate parts of the body stand in an inner relationship to each other.

The body is not ruled by outside impulses alone. The body is intentional, seeking for meaning. Our consciousness is always directed towards something. Merleau – Ponty emphasizes that human beings and society depend on each other. This is obvious in play. The children “read” each other’s bodies. In play communication cannot be regarded as a puzzle where statements and movements are translated from one area to another. Such a process will be too long-winded, and the play will be destroyed because it becomes slow and boring. The phenomenal body reads the intentions by those they are acting with and know how to respond in an adequate way.

In the Norwegian National Curriculum, knowledge also includes social behaviour and practice. The physical movement combines acting and thinking (Duesund 1995). Practice and theoretical knowledge complete each other in movements. Activity occurs in the body and is mediated through the body. Theory is also developed from the body. The child must be able to understand and follow the rules. The child must think while acting. Knowledge about *how* to act demands a competent child because acting is bound to a context.

Ayres (1989) emphasizes that a good integration of the senses is very important if the children shall be able to meet the formal aims of knowledge in school. Each sense working optimal is not enough. The co-operation between the senses must also be satisfactory. According to Ayres the tactile system, the kinaesthetic system and the vestibular system is of especially great importance for children's learning.

The tactile system regards touch, deep pressure, pain, heat and cold.

The kinaesthetic system includes all the sensory receptors in the muscles, tendons and joints, and give us information about the position of the body.

The vestibular system in the inner ear gives us information about the position of the head. This information helps to maintain static and dynamic balance. The vestibular system is the most important structure in the regulation of body postures. It prevents falling and contributes to graceful, coordinated movements.

Ayres maintains that many of the problems with learning in school are due to these three systems and the cooperation between them. These important senses are trained in R&T. In such a view R&T can have a preventive function in a society characterized by lower physical activity. In addition this will be done in an attractive way because the sign of play is "intrinsic motivation", "suspension of reality" and "internal locus of control" (Levy 1978).

Rough-and-tumble play. Adult roles.

In order to maximise the positive results of play for children's development and learning, the adults have to take an active role in order to give children rich and varied play experience. In this work there are three basic steps: (1) Providing resources for play (2) Observing play (3) Becoming supportively and responsively involved in play (Johnson, Christie & Yawkey 1999:204). This time my attention is concentrated on the adult role in the direct meeting with R&T. Adult involvement in play is a controversial question. Johnson, Christie and Yawkey (1999:190) refer to research on adult involvement in play. They conclude in this way:

"Our position is that adult involvement can have both positive and negative effects on play. The crucial variable is how adults become involved in play. If adults interact with children in a sensitive, responsive, and supporting manner, they can enhance children's play. On the other hand, if adults take over control of play, provide too much structure, or interrupt play for academic purposes, children's play will probably suffer" (Johnson, Christie and Yawkey 1999:217).

As most play theorists Johnson, Christie & Yawkey write about the adult role mainly in sociodramatic play; but how adults become involved in play is also a crucial variable to children in R&T.

A series of recent descriptive researches have given us knowledge about positive and negative effects on play. Adult roles can be collected in this categorical system: uninvolved, onlooker, stage manager, co player, play leader and director/instructor (Johnson, Christie & Yawkey 1999:209). These adult roles must be seen along a continuum from no involvement/interest on the one side to complete control on the other. The extreme roles as uninvolved and director/instructor tend to have negative effects on children's play experience. The adult roles as onlooker, stage manager, co player and play leader are considered to be the most productive roles.

The uninvolvement: pay no attention to play and only act as security and intervene just when obvious conflicts and danger occur, or when the play gets loud and noisy.

The onlooker serve as an active audience for the children's play and show their interest and accept through non-verbal signs and verbal comments to the players.

The stage manager does not enter the play, but takes a more active role to help the children to prepare their play and to offer assistance when the play has started.

The co player becomes an active and equal participant in children's play.

The play leader is a more active participant in children's play than the co player. The play leader takes more influence in order to enrich and extend ongoing play.

The director/instructor takes control of the play and tells the children how to play.

Which of the roles that appears to be the best one, must be considered in connection with the actual situation, the child and the group. Through observations of children's play the teacher continuously must evaluate which of the adult roles that seem to be the best one in order to enhance and support play.

Results

I have chosen a few examples from my field notes to illustrate my findings. The glimpses are taken from written observations and transcripts from the interviews.

Class one

The children were very inventive to use all opportunities for R&T. The boys especially enjoyed catching each other, play fighting and wrestling:

"Two boys are wrestling with each other – a large nine year old boy and a little six year old boy. The oldest one gives resistance, but treats the younger one with care (...) I tell I am impressed of the way the older one is adapting his strength to the younger one. He gives me a smile and says that the youngest one was allowed to wrestle as hard as he could manage, but he himself did not have this opportunity because he was the strongest one. Therefore he just used one hand!"

There were no adults present during the play presented above, and I decided to take the role as an onlooker. In this class R&T was left alone to the children. The main teacher played the role as uninvolvement. The main teacher said about R&T play:

"(...) Close contact I think is important to the children. They get an opportunity to use and to try their strength. But I must say I have little experience with this type of play (...) I am afraid it easily can become serious (...) The first times I thought the fighting was real when I found them rolling on the ground (...) This play demands an adult being present. And we do not have too many of them, so I find this to be a bit difficult (...)"

The main teacher, who chose an active role in other types of play, took the role as an uninvolvement in R&T. Her resistance was obvious. The children got no help to understand how to avoid conflicts and how to maintain the play. She tried to stop them when obvious conflicts occurred, and when the play got loud and noisy.

Class two:

R&T was of great importance in this class too – not only for the boys, but also for many of the girls. At this time wrestling matches were of special interest:

"In the schoolyard six of the children start to play R&T. They throw each other on the ground. Two of them are girls. The main teacher participates in the play. She accepts to be thrown on the ground by the children".

Five children are active in a wrestling match:

“(...) But the play can be conflicted. The group can easily become so big that the children do not manage to administrate their own play. Pushes and strikes occur and lead to crying, Another teacher who is together with the class at the time, starts a discussion with the main teacher. She wants to forbid the play (...)”.

In R&T the main teacher surveyed the situation and chose roles which were positive according to the actual situation. She avoided acting as an uninvolved. According to the situation she acted both as an onlooker, a stage manager, a co player, a play leader – and as an instructor. As an onlooker she showed her interest and support through non-verbal signs and verbal comments. As a stage manager she helped the children to prepare their play and offered assistance when the play had started. As a co player and a play leader she took an active part in play where the children took lead most of the time. She gave indirect guidance. The children could observe her behaviour, in what way she took care for her playmates, how she used her strength and so on. She gave concrete examples according to how the children themselves could act. In some situations she also took the role as an instructor in a positive way. In fighting play and wrestling matches she told the children that two playmates at the moment were enough. Besides, they had to make the rules clear before starting, and the play had to come to an end when one of the playmates said: Stop!

With respect and care I think the instructor role can be of great value in R&T where the children are in so close contact with each other. R&T separates from dramatic play and must perhaps be evaluated a bit differently. In this class the adult role as an instructor in a positive way helped the children to maintain the play with joy and few conflicts.

Class three

Once a week this class used to spend the whole day at “their own place” in the forest. This place lay about 15 minutes walk from the school. This area had a hilly ground with small mountains, trees and paths. R&T was most obvious when they were in the forest, but I also recognised this play in the schoolyard among the boys.

The boys were especially interested in playing “Sinbad the Sailor”; “Turtles” and “Dinosaurs”. In this glimpse they are playing “Turtles”:

“(...) They do a united front against the others, coming creeping down the path. The two groups run around, fence and shoot at each other. My focus is directed towards two of the boys. They are fencing with sticks. I am impressed by how perfect they harmonise their movements to each other, how they can hit each other without doing any harm. The movements are accompanied with sounds which are perfectly timed to the movements”.

Two teachers were sharing the job as main teacher in this class. Both took the role as onlookers in children’s play. The interviews showed that this was a conscious choice. They did not want to disturb or direct children’s play. However, they surveyed the play and helped the children to solve problems. These children are playing “Dinosaurs”:

“(...) A new challenge occurs. Two of the playmates begin to fight seriously. Main teacher 1 recognises this at once and is coming in order to guide and mediate. They discuss roles and how to develop the play in a democratic way (...) She finishes by asking: Are you able to go on playing now? They are, and the play is intense and living until they have to go back to school 25 minutes later”.

“(...) “Sinbad the Sailor” is the theme of the play, but they disagree on how to distribute the roles and how to develop the play. They begin to throw pieces of wood towards each other. Main teacher 2 takes place on a rock together with the children and guides them to chose another play. They agree and start to play hide-and-peek”.

Main teacher 2 did not help the children to continue their play, but guided them to chose another play. In the interview she said:

“I do not like war games (...) I do not like weapons because it often ends with crying. When they play “Dinosaurs” they have the same opportunity to use their strength, close contacts, but it more seldom ends with crying. But if they play war there is always a stone or a stick (...) that becomes a weapon, and I do not like it”

Main teacher 2 expressed directly that she saw the value of R&T, except for war games with stones and sticks as weapons. The starting point to main teacher 1 was a bit different. She saw the value in playing “Turtles” and “Sinbad the Sailor” – games closely connected with war games:

“ (...) I am impressed by the way they manage to start the play, how they manage to rule it, their general view, and how they change between being inside and outside the play, how they use the spoken language in play (...)”.

Main teacher 1 saw the parallels between this play and positive experience from her own childhood when she was playing “Robin Hood” with her playmates. To her it was important to act as a more competent other (Vygotsky 1978) in order to make them able to maintain and develop their own play with joy and few conflicts.

Discussion

Smith and Boulton (1987) suggest that R&T may take up something like 10% of children’s play, but that there will be considerable variations according to gender, age and playground surface and so on. In my study it was difficult to measure R&T in per cent because the play forms to a large extent overlapped each other (the danger of errors). However, I will estimate R&T to take up at least 20% of the children’s play as I observed it during thirty days in my field studies.

According to the adult role in R&T the four main teachers all expressed they saw the value in R&T, but practise showed that this was understood in different ways and resulted in different practice. Just one of the main teachers took an active part in R&T, and just two of them guided the play in a manner that made the children able to maintain and develop their play. One of the classes in my research spent one day a week outside the school on “their place” in the forest. Observing the main teachers in this class gave interesting information. R&T in the schoolyard was met with little interest. Here the adults took the role of the uninvolved. In the forest the picture of their practice in play became more complete. None of them took an active part in the play as a co player or a play leaders, a practice the interviews showed depended on a conscious choice and referred to all kinds of children’s play. But both acted as onlookers. Besides, one of them acted as a stage manager.

My main conclusion is that there are great attitudinal differences among the adults, but that R&T is not accepted in the same way as other parts of play with movements, constructional play, role play and rule play. However, this was more obvious when the focus was directed towards the two assistants and the other teachers acting in the schoolyard. Most teachers tried to stop R&T, forbid it or ignore it for several reasons. Main teacher in class two expresses:

“(...) You see what is happening? When the children have fighting play, wrestling matches or are rolling on the ground, the other teachers just turn their back on it. They have either initiated the play or allowed it. Therefor they take no responsibility. I feel their criticism for allowing this play and for taking an active part in it”.

R&T as play

Rasmussen (1992) says that the mental side of play has been focused in literature. The result is that the body and the movement as important parts of play has been pushed into the shadow. Besides, it may be difficult for adults to identify themselves to the childlike

demonstration of body and movement. This makes us less capable to understand how important and valuable R&T is from the children's point of view.

Often R&T is not understood as play, but as conflicts and real fighting. Main teacher in class one expresses this when she says that the first times she found children rolling on the ground, she thought this happened outside the frame of play (among others: Schwartzman 1978) . Such an interpretation will easily lead to an adult role of no advantage for children and R&T.

The moral opinion

None of the main teachers directly expressed they had a moral resistance towards R&T, an opinion not to bring children up to fighting, violence and war. Although, through my own practice in school, I think this is an important point when resistance towards R&T is tried to be understood. Mouritsen, researcher on children's culture, maintains that disorder in play challenges our moral opinion. Mouritsen (1996) and Olofsson (1990) both emphasize that children are more competent to distinguish between what is play and what is reality than many of the adults.

Mouritsen brings up another aspect. He is talking about R&T as an important part of children's culture and the aesthetic characteristics in this play. That is the way in which the children adapt their movements to each other, their artistic jumps and hits and sounds which are perfectly timed to the situation. These aesthetic characteristics were exactly what impressed me when the boys fought against each other as "Turtles" in the forest. If teachers turn their back to this play, they will neither get information about this play nor become aware of the qualities in it.

Conflicts

One of the main teachers do not like war play because it so often ends with conflicts and crying. Conflicts in R&T are usually more obvious, but not necessarily more serious than conflicts in other types of play. Åm (1989) observed how children in some situations could hurt each others feelings without the adults being aware of it. Reflecting to this I think most of us will not consider small physical accidents as more serious than quiet conflicts hurting the children's feelings.

Fear for losing control

None of the main teachers directly expressed that R&T created a feeling of chaos to them. Fischer and Madsen (1990) have made a research in Danish kindergartens where the focus is directed against the adult's feeling of chaos. Fischer and Madsen do not connect this feeling directly to R&T, but to situations where the adults generally have the feeling of losing control. What mainly caused this feeling was increasing noise. Noise was defined as something negative and not as an expression for something. This shows how important it is to take the children's point of view, to interpret their signals and to look for what is happening in R&T.

Fear for injuries

In Norway we can notice an increasing knowledge of the importance of play with movements generally. At the same time we have a discussion about safety. Safety is to be taken seriously, but at the same time pedagogues have a responsibility to create a stimulating environment which gives challenges, positive tension and possibilities for the children. Injuries probably arise to a larger degree when the teachers do not pay attention to the play and give necessary support and guidance (Trageton 1997). We saw how one of the main teacher acted more competent (Vygotsky 1978) towards R&T in class two. She gave them ways to administer and develop their play in order to avoid conflicts and injuries.

As mentioned earlier, the two main teachers in class three ignored R&T in the schoolyard. In the forest both main teachers acted as onlookers. One of them acted as a stage manager, as

well. "Their own place" in the forest was with its hilly ground, small mountains, trees and paths perfectly suited for R&T. Perhaps R&T in the forest by the adults were regarded as less dangerous. The children had more space and the playground surface was more suitable.

Knowledge about the value of R&T for development and learning

Pedagogical practise will always be a picture of our knowledge, our values and what we find important to emphasize in our work with children. All the main teachers expressed they saw the value and importance of R&T for the children, but variable practises showed that this was understood in different ways. Knowledge about R&T as a contribution to social development was expressed by two of the four main teachers. However, most teachers in my field studies found it difficult to see R&T as a playful training of social competence. Besides, none of the main teachers expressed that R&T was a contribution to formal aims of knowledge in school. According to my experience we neither have good enough knowledge about the body as the centre for reflection nor of the importance of the three basic senses and the co-operation between them.

Conclusion

My main conclusion is that there are great attitudinal differences among the adults. For several reasons R&T is not accepted in the same way as other parts of play with movements, constructional play, role play and rule play. Few days ago I went into the database OCLC FIRST SEARCH to see how many hits I could find about R&T compared with other play categories:

Play category	WorldCat	ECO	ArticleFirst
Motor play	610	90	30
R&T	7	2	10
Object play	220	60	30
Constructive play	60	20	4
Dramatic play	2300	80	60
Role play	15000	3900	3300
Rule play	270	50	30

WorldCat OCLC catalog of books, web rescourses, and other material worldwide
 ECO An OCLC collection of scholarly journals (Browse Journal Titles)
 ArticleFirst An OCLC index of article

Very few R&T – hits shows that this play is not a primary field of research. From my point of view, R&T has so far been neglected in literature. I hope this will change.

Through his categorization Lillemyr (1998) shows that movement and body is an important part of play for older children, as well. He places play with movements and R&T on the same foot. I think it is useful to categorise R&T as a separate play category and not a subcategory of physical play as we find it in most play literature.

I hope a more widespread research will increase our knowledge about the benefits of R&T. We as pedagogues have to see the differences between R&T and real fighting. We have to understand that R&T is a contribution to social development. In this play children both have to take care of their playmates and have the possibility to increase their social competence. As pedagogues we also have to understand in what way R&T is a contribution to learning subjects in school.

I still have many questions about R&T. My new work aims to increase knowledge about benefits of R&T play in order to change the attitude among the adults. Two classes in lower primary school are followed for an additional period of one year to cast further light on area of play and education.

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