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Play Communities in the Early Childhood Classroom

Abstract

This paper proposes that play communities, socially constructed by young children in educational settings, are important contexts of communication, interaction, and learning. Communication is an integral part of the successful creation and management of play within a specific group of children. Interaction between players and play groups and connections between subjective and collective understandings of the social play form the basis of community. Shared knowledge of play events, of play environments (space and materials), and of the common play interests of individuals are important to young children's creation and maintenance of play communities. Learning is promoted through individual knowledge, symbolic understanding, and social interaction. Discussion of data from two longitudinal research studies, conducted in preschool classrooms, will demonstrate that play communities are vital elements of the early childhood classroom. The process of documenting the creation and management of play communities will be shared. The factors that encourage or discourage the development of play communities will be examined.

Introduction

The early childhood classroom is a place in society where children and adults meet and participate together in a community of social, cultural, and symbolic significance (Dahlberg, Moses, & Pence, 1999). The amount of autonomy given to the children in the classroom depends on the adults, who are in charge of the time, environment, materials, and activities ... the curriculum. Adults have goals and ideas about what should be taught and learned; children also have ideas about what they want to do in this group, often choosing social activities. The combined goals, shared experiences, and physical involvement of adults and children create the classroom community.

In the early childhood classroom community, the children's predominantly chosen activity of social interaction is play. Social play is a preferred activity of young children. Additionally, play is a common phenomenon within the child culture unique to the young children within a specific classroom community. Children as young as 3 years and 4 years of age construct social play together in a specific early childhood classroom (Paley, 1988; Meckley, 1994b).

The creation and invention of play begins when one or more children engage in a set of actions or an action plan (Garvey, 1990); a plan for play may or may not be verbalized. But the play continues in a purposeful combination of actions and/or words that is ordered and may be repeated again. Such repetition assures that a particular set of actions will become a common play event. As a play event develops, other children in this class may join, watch, leave and arrive. The social construction of a play event continues in this particular time and setting. However, not only is one play event or action plan enacted in a given classroom play community of children, but several simultaneous play events are also occurring in other settings nearby. Although many different events are happening concurrently, the group of children maintains elements of order and consistency through shared knowledge of the play. This multi-layered description of creation and maintenance illuminates the nature of the social construction of young children's play (Meckley, 1994b). As children construct social play together they become members of early childhood play communities.

Early childhood play community is here defined as a group of young players who voluntarily share in the creation and maintenance of one or more play events through mutual

interests, social interactions, communication, and negotiation. This definition is based on John Dewey's attributes necessary for formation of a true community. According to Dewey, a viable community is defined through the components of shared common interests, cooperative social interaction, and communication between (play) groups (Dewey 1966, p. 5, 24, 87).

Communication creates knowledge and depends on the sharing of actions, ideas, and feelings with others ... self-disclosure and self-understanding through shared common interests. "Communication depends on community" (Fogel, 1993, p. 12). Community is where culture exists with all the necessary rules for social understanding ... which may occur as early as 3 years of age when children show a clear grasp of context-specific rules (Dunn, 1988). "Culturally accepted behavior arises spontaneously as part of children's interactions with others" (Fogel, 1993, p. 13).

Therefore, social activities within communities and cultures may be the most important contexts for children's learning. Play, as a socially ubiquitous and cultural experience in early childhood, becomes the primary contextual experience through which children view and gain understanding of themselves as "social individuals" (Dewey, 1897; Cuffaro, 1995). The culture of society is reflected and understood in the child culture of play.

In the early childhood classroom, play communities are created and maintained by the children as players. Adults may encourage or discourage play communities and thus influence children's social, cultural and symbolic learning.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss data uncovered in two longitudinal five-month research studies conducted in two different but similar classrooms with two different ages of children. Does an examination of the nature and components of early childhood play communities validate these communities as important to social interaction, communication, and learning? What are the differences that may be caused by the age of the children?

Two Longitudinal Research Studies

Methodology

Two longitudinal research studies were conducted: one in a class of 3 year old children and one in a class of 4 year old children. In both studies, the primary research purpose was to document the continuous flow of collective, interactive, simultaneous play events within and between familiar players and play groups over a long period of time. These studies are based on the premise that in order to understand children's social play construction, the researcher must use a child cultural, contextual, and group not individual play perspective (Meckley, 1994b).

Each research study encompassed a five-month period from January to May in an early childhood classroom in the same school located in a suburban neighborhood. The school's program philosophy follows a developmental learning model based on integrated curriculum and a partnership between home and school as stated in the Information Book. Each classroom has spacious, well-equipped rooms and teachers trained in early childhood education.

Each class was selected based on: 1) the age of the children; 2) the teacher's commitment to the value of play; and 3) the amount of time in each session given for children's self-selected play, averaging 25% per session over the entire study. These are important criteria for young children's quality social pretend play as documented by Bretherton (1984), Christie and Wardle (1992), and Fein and Schwartz (1986).

Additionally, the children in each class attended school for 3 days each week for 2 and a 1/2 hours each day. These groups of children were very evenly matched in all factors except age. Therefore, the variable of age becomes significant in comparing the play constructions of each class.

The 4 year olds class was composed of 12 four- and five-year-old children, 6 boys and 6 girls. Mean age was 4 years 9 months. The 3 year olds class was composed of 13 three- and four-year-old children, 9 boys and 4 girls. Mean age was 3 years 10 months. The majority of the children came from middle-class families of similar backgrounds in culture and socioeconomic factors.

The author and a student research assistant observed each group's social play for an average of 28 consecutive class sessions over a five month period from January to May. Since the children in each class had been playing together as a group since September, this time frame guaranteed a group of familiar players. The study was undertaken from an ethnographic perspective; the researcher's role was observer as participant (see Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, Chapter 4, for complete description of this research role). Each researcher took notes and interacted with the children in a minimal way. Children were regularly informed at gathering times that the researcher was interested in their play; their comments were encouraged at any time.

Data was collected through field notes, audio and video taping, interviews, surveys and meetings with parents and teachers, and comments of children and teachers as they watched the taped play.

The data collection unit was a play event occurring during playtime. The components of these events involved participants, setting, time, objects, action sequence, and language. An event was defined by the participants through the actions (e.g. body posture, gaze) and language (e.g. naming the play activity). As much as possible, all participants were located in setting and time throughout each session's play time periods. A context coding system was used in data collection and analysis (Meckley & Sheaffer, 2000)

As many as six concurrent events were documented as occurring at any given time. Actions, words, and objects were added to activity descriptions as noted. Audio and video taping with the use of two cameras and six suspended microphones, recording events in different settings of the room simultaneously, yielded a significant amount of information concerning the play events.

A detailed chronological context map of the events during play was done for each observed day. Play events and daily events were listed in order of occurrence and coded across the following dimensions: event order throughout day; duration; setting; participants and absentees; objects used in play; actions of players and play groups during events; and words stated during play. Analysis of this context map resulted in the documentation of sixty (60) distinct play events in the 4 year old class and thirty (30) play events in the 3 year old class. A Play Event Descriptive Summary was completed for the play events in each class, enabling the researcher to group events by key components of setting, players, actions, and/or objects.

Results

Of the many play events documented over the five month study in each early childhood classroom (60 events in the 4 year olds class and 30 events in the 3 year olds class), two particular play events (one event from each age group) will be analyzed and discussed. These two play events were created by the children in play communities observed during the study and maintained by the children through communication of play knowledge. Additionally, these two play events increased social interaction in each classroom and promoted learning independent of the teacher or school curriculum.

In the 4 year olds class, the play event named Blaster is representative of communication and shared common interest in play communities. In the 3 year olds class the play event named Laser is representative of cooperative social interaction and culture in play communities.

Blaster is an excellent example of how play knowledge is communicated from a play community to the rest of the children in the class. The constructing of a unique complex block structure began this play event. The construction was accomplished through the direction of a boy, usually Jason, who was the play leader. In addition to the time-consuming construction and preparation of this structure called a Blaster, a sequence of actions linked to this block structure identified this specific play event whenever it occurred.

When each play event first occurred then potentially reoccurred throughout this five month study, it followed a sequence of actions including use of specific objects by specific players, a play community, that identified it to both children, teachers, and researchers as that unique play event. Therefore, Blaster was identified by the particular players in the play

community, the unique configuration of the block structure, and the sequence of both actions and words linked to that structure. These factors communicated to the entire class community the activities and happenings occurring or about to occur in the block play community at a given moment on a particular day.

Blaster, a play event enacted only by boys in the 4 year olds classroom, occurred 12 times over the last three months of the study, March to May. The Blaster Play Event Descriptive Summary is found in Table 1.

Table 1

Blaster Play Event Descriptive Summary (4 and 5 year olds)

Class:	4 and 5 year olds
Name:	“BLASTER”
Setting:	Blocks and Housekeeping
Time/Months:	March to May
Time/Occurrence:	12 total over study
Time/Daily:	46 “ (minutes) average
Players:	Boys 6/6 Girls 0/6

Sequence of Actions and “Words”:

- I Building with large wooden blocks, a complex structure labeled "blaster"
[Jason 10/12; Peter 1/12; Lou 1/12].
- II Getting and placing objects on or near blaster:

e.g. *unit blocks* as "supplies and battery packs", *manipulatives* as "power bolts and messenger bombs"; *kitchen items* as "food"
[Jason 11/12; Peter 12/12; Noah 10/12; Lou 2/12; Shawn 2/12; Carl 1/12]
- III Firing of “laser beams” or “power bolts” or “retro-bombs”
 - IIIA A boy runs behind blaster and makes a sound and hand motions to fire a laser beam at "people who bother us" (girls are targets in 90% of firings)
[Jason 12/12, Peter 2/12]
 - IIIB Other boys as players fire with power bolts held to eyes or throw retro-bombs concurrent to blaster's firing
[Peter 6/12, Noah 3/12]

Blaster was a play event created by Jason after a girl play community began building and playing in the block setting which had been his exclusive domain in the first month of the study. First Jason created the Castle play event to include these girls, then he initiated the Blaster event to exclude them from the block setting. Blaster effectively decreased the girl block community's activities in the block setting but increased housekeeping play events that were less setting specific. In fact, several housekeeping play events served to provide interventions to the conflicts introduced by Blaster (see Discussion).

In the 3 year olds class the play event Laser is an excellent example of cooperative social interaction and culture in play communities. Dewey, testing the degree of cooperative interaction and communication between groups, asks "how full and free is the interplay" between social interactions in a given society or community (1966, p. 86). Laser play event enacted in this classroom demonstrated a high degree of social interaction and child cultural knowledge.

The Laser play event appeared in the 3 year olds class immediately after the winter break and directly related to the movie "Toy Story 2" and the accompanying toy characters. Laser play was a play event created by Nick, then regularly started by Nigel, and finally initiated by Ryan in a more aggressive manner later in the study. Laser occurred 20 times from January to mid-April. Laser play event was enacted by 8 of the 13 children in the class (7 of 9 boys and 1 of 4 girls). The play action, after being started primarily by 1 or 2 boys, was usually continued by a core group of 3 boys. The Laser Play Event Descriptive Summary including the Sequence of Actions is found in Table 2.

Table 2

Laser Play Event Descriptive Summary (3 and 4 year olds)

Class:	3 and 4 year olds
Name:	"LASER-LASER-LASER"
Setting:	Anywhere (often near Blocks and Housekeeping)
Time/Months:	February to April
Time/Occurrence:	20 total over study
Time/Daily:	15 " (minutes) average
Players:	Boys 7/9 Girls 1/4

Sequence of Actions and "Words":

- I Announcement with "Words" starts play event
(e.g. "Playing bad guys." "I am Buzz Lightyear." "I will save you."
"Let's get them." "Let's shoot them with laser gun.")
[Nigel 6/20; Nick 5/20; Ryan 6/20; Florian 3/20; Doug 2/20; Maria 0/20]
- II Action - Arm Laser or Shooting sound
Words "Laser. Laser. Laser"
 - IIA One child extends arm, horizontally, and says,
"Laser. Laser. Laser"
 - IIB One child makes shooting sounds toward another child or wall,
extends arm or other objects (e.g. stuffed carrot, kitchen objects)

- III Other children run over to play leader and imitate same actions as in II
[Florian 12/20; Doug 11/20; Nigel 14/20; Nick 8/20; Ryan 8/20; David 2/20; Maria 1/20]
- IV Role Playing of Characters (i.e. Buzz Lightyear and Zerg and bad guy)
Discussion (Words) and some Actions introduced. Children 1) declare a child as a character to continue play or 2) become characters and role play or 3) invent imaginary characters to fight
[Doug 10/20, Nigel 6/20, Nick 8/20]
- V Action – Arm Laser or Shooting sound
Words “Laser. Laser. Laser”
VA One child extends arm, horizontally, and says,
“Laser. Laser. Laser”
VB One child makes shooting sounds toward another child or wall,
extends arm or other objects (e.g. stuffed carrot, kitchen objects)
Sometimes
- VI Laser play becomes aggressive with children making body contact
[Ryan 4/8 and Nigel 4/14]

Analysis of the components that are the same and different between Blaster Play and Laser Play are presented in Table 3. Components that both play events share are listed in the middle of Table 3 just like shared components from two separate items are listed in the middle of a Venn Diagram. Of note are the multiple shared components in these two unique play events created in two separate classrooms and by two different age groups. The discussion will focus on this Analysis of the two play events and play communities.

Discussion

On the surface, an adult may interpret either of these play events as exclusionary, aggressive, and play that promotes violence. Inequity is noted in the gender of players common to both Blaster and Laser Play. Boys are the primary players in both creating and maintaining both play events. Blaster is a play event created by a boy to exclude girls from the blocks; the blast of the laser beam from the blaster is targeted directly at girls nearby. Laser is physical, active, and does become aggressive but only with Ryan’s and Nigel’s laser actions. Both play events involve lasers, targets, and shooting sounds and actions. This play looks violent; such play appears to mirror a violent society where conflicts are solved with weapons and elimination of the “bad” person.

Conflicts do precede the beginning of both of these play events. Blaster is a reaction to an ongoing month long conflict created by one boy’s desire for possession of the block area. Laser is preceded on a daily basis by disagreements over play ideas and the use of objects for these play events. Yet, both play communities created and enacted a play event that communicated clearly the shared common interests and goals of the players and promoted negotiation through play knowledge.

Table 3

Analysis of Components of Blaster and Laser Play Events

<u>Only Blaster</u>	<u>Both Blaster and Laser</u>	<u>Only Laser</u>
100% All Boys	PLAYERS Boys	75% Boys & One Girl
Occurs at End of Study Occurs for 46 " average	TIME Beginning of Play Period	Occurs at Beginning of Study Occurs for 15 " average
Blocks, House	SETTING Blocks, House Directed Toward Source of Conflict	Any area
Construction Hollow Blocks, Unit Blocks	OBJECTS and TOYS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands/Arms used • Shooting Sounds • Signal Warning Before Shooting • Adapting Toys for Shooting 	Movie Action Figure (not real toy but provides joint play construction, joint play knowledge)
less words < mostly actions little repetition of sequence more rigid	PLAY EVENT KNOWLEDGE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique to Class Community • All Children Know Play Event by order, words, actions, objects • Simply looks – *aggressive • Complex analysis reveals – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *highly communicative *facilitates social interaction *encourages cooperation *solves conflict *causes conflict 	# of words = # of actions repetition of sequence more adaptations
<u>Heada</u> Loud humming, Father play	INTERVENTION <u>Children</u> <u>Teachers</u> + Head <i>Teacher</i> - Student <i>Teacher</i> --Substitute <i>Teacher</i>	<u>Emma</u> Builds walls, Starts another activity
Absentees One boy often absent Adults Do not know play event	PROBLEMS	Late-comer One boy comes late and becomes aggressive

Communication occurred through objects, words, sounds, hand and arm postures, and sequence of actions that were all unique to the play event and known by the class community. In interviews by the researcher concerning blaster play, 100% of the children in this class community could identify the block structure as a blaster and could identify the sequence of actions defining the blaster play event. Not only was play event knowledge evident in each class, but also social interaction, negotiation, and cooperation was discovered in complex analysis of all of the play events occurring concurrently.

Increased social interaction through increased concurrent and intersecting play events was first noticed by the Head Teacher in the 4 year old class. She observed that after Blaster play began, the housekeeping events seemed to “spill out into the entire classroom.” Objects, players, and events in the housekeeping play communities became pervasive throughout the classroom. During the occurrence of the blaster play event in this study, there was a high degree of concurrent and intersecting play events enacted. Concurrent play is defined as: 1) play occurring in the same time period as other play but not necessarily in the same setting; 2) play not overtly influencing other concurrent play events (Meckley, 1994b, p. 131). Intersecting play is defined as: 1) play occurring in the same time period as other play and usually in same or adjacent setting; 2) play directly influencing and being influenced by the play event to which it intersects (Meckley, 1994b, p. 131).

A total of ten concurrent and intersecting play events involved dyads and triads of all of the girls in the 4 year olds class. Eight of the ten play events were engaged in by housekeeping play communities. During this playtime period, numerous displays of diverse social interactions among these play communities exhibited many varied modes of communication including cooperative conflict resolution and intervention.

Certain girls, Heada and Emma, used their play knowledge about play events or about particular players in the class for maintaining the stability of the play, entering the play of others, or identifying with others through the elicitation of certain aspects of the common play event. The maintenance of stability of their jointly constructed play enactments is more important to young children than the control of territory or materials (Corsaro, 1985; Meckley 1994b).

One example of such a intervention technique was Heada's elicitation of a housekeeping play event understood as Father to temper the aggressive mannerisms of Jason preceding the firing of the blaster laser beam or raging at another child. "Father!" Heada would loudly call to Jason from the housekeeping area as he was beginning an aggressive overture. In all instances, Jason would turn, grumbling, and walk over and sit down at the housekeeping table saying, "alright, I'm coming." Although this happened only 4 times during the study, it was a highly effective intervention tactic used through a play event by a 4 year old girl based on her understanding of a 4 year old boy's common play interests, individual play style, and difficulty with social relationships.

Another example of successful intervention occurred in the 3 year olds classroom. After several boys built a block blockade at housekeeping during Laser play, Emma built another block wall to join the blockade then created a door for those children who wanted to “escape” the Laser play. The Laser players included Emma and her wall in their ensuing discussions and actions. Emma began another play activity and the Laser players followed her lead.

In both classrooms and both play communities specific children manifested understanding of the subjective and collective play of others to maintain social interaction and prevent disorder within and between play groups; Dewey (1966) affirms that such individual investments in social relationships and control are important to both community-building and education.

Unfortunately, sometimes teachers are remiss in understanding and using only a surface analysis of children's play. A student teacher in the 3 year olds class declared, “today I will hear no stories about lasers because lasers are not allowed in this school.” Another day a substitute

teacher in the same classroom stated, "I am warning you all ...we do not fight here. We are not going to use our hands to hurt one another." After the first comment a boy said, "We can't play Laser and Buzz so let's play Power Rangers." After the second comment, a boy sighed and said, " Let's karate chop with our hands." Both of these boys were sent to the tables to put their heads down; one boy dissolved in tears.

Also, parents are often lacking in understanding concerning the importance of continual play knowledge and social interaction. In both classrooms in this study, children who were often absent or regularly arrived late to school missed the beginning or sequence of the play events and therefore experienced difficulty in joining play events that were already underway. In the 3 year olds class, Ryan became aggressive in Laser play only after his parent continually began to bring him to school 30 minutes late.

All groups of children who regularly play together have play events that they repeatedly enact. Often these play events and the forms of their enactment are unique to a specific class or child culture (Paley, 1988). Also, the more familiar this particular play becomes to the players the less explicit are the signals and other metacommunicative cues needed to play it (Giffin, 1984).

Often a newcomer to the play culture within the play communities notices a flow or type of play speech and action that may be hard to understand or be misinterpreted. A child outsider (from a different child culture or group) is usually informed of the common play events through explicit language and action (Florio, 1978). Children adapt best to a school community through a child culture they create [i.e. play communities] and an understanding of the rules of this play culture (Paley, 1988). Such rule understanding was evident in Laser play.

Creation of play communities, management of the sequences of actions, and understanding of the rules was observed in both ages under study. In the two play events analyzed, the differences according to age were in amount of time of the play event and number of repetitions of sequence of actions needed to maintain the play event. The 3 year olds seem to need a considerable amount of discussion and negotiation to continue the play, whereas the 4 year olds needed more time to create the constructions. Both age groups demonstrated a high level of communication, interaction and learning through their play.

Educational Implications

In both age groups of children and in both classes, certain factors encouraged and discouraged the development of play communities.

Teachers should encourage play communities by:

- 1) providing an environment for social play including appropriate time, space, materials and settings for play communities to develop and continue within the class community;
- 2) observing and using play knowledge in planning for children's learning;
- 3) acknowledging play communities as valuable social learning contexts within the class community.

Teachers should avoid discouraging play community development by:

- 1) informing parents of the importance of bringing children to school early or on time and maintaining children's regular attendance in school.
- 2) communicating to student and substitute teachers the types of play permitted in a particular class community and the purposes of children's play events.

Conclusion

In our roles as educational researchers and teachers, recognition of early childhood play communities as valuable contexts for social learning cannot be underestimated. If we underestimate the learning value of play, we will undereducate the children. This paper, through

the presentation of selected data from a five-month research study, provides examples of the complexity of young children's play, supporting the fact that children learn best through interaction within play communities. Play is certainly a purposeful and preferred child cultural activity of young children which provides an avenue for social and cooperative learning and many varied modes of communication.

"We need to be aware that play is a means of teaching and learning, but we must not forget that the children engage in play, not with the aim of teaching or learning, but with the aim of playing. Play belongs to the players." (Dockett & Fleer, 1999, p. 9)

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