



I think I can: Preschoolers' private speech and motivation in playful versus non-playful contexts



Jeremy Sawyer

The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), 365 5th Ave, New York, NY 10016, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 January 2016

Received in revised form 1 September 2016

Accepted 14 September 2016

Keywords:

Private speech

Mastery motivation

Play

Preschool education

Vygotsky

Intrinsic motivation

Extrinsic motivation

Self-determination theory (SDT)

Young children

Early childhood education

ABSTRACT

Vygotskian theory and empirical evidence suggest that children's private speech and pretend play contribute to their development of motivational processes. Given current U.S. preschool expansion, and resurgent debates over the merits of play-based vs. non-play-based approaches to early childhood education, this study conducted an experimental investigation of the relative impact of these contexts on preschoolers' private speech and mastery motivation (performance and persistence). 38 preschool children engaged in a challenging fishing activity in two experimental conditions (playful and non-playful) simulating pedagogical and motivational (intrinsic vs. extrinsic) characteristics of common preschool settings. Private speech was categorized as *cognitive*, *motivational*, *metacognitive*, *playful* or *partially internalized*, and the emotional valence of private speech was marked as positive or negative. Results indicated that preschoolers in the playful condition displayed higher mastery motivation than preschoolers in the non-playful condition. Children in the playful condition used more frequent private speech, including more frequent cognitive, playful, and positively valenced private speech. Mastery motivation was positively correlated with playful, partially internalized, and positively valenced private speech, but negatively related to motivational private speech. Mastery motivation components (performance and persistence) related to different types of private speech. Performance related positively to metacognitive private speech and negatively to motivational private speech. Persistence related positively to playful private speech. The playful condition elicited private speech categories that were associated with higher motivation levels. Findings support the use of playful and play-based pedagogy in early childhood education, and teacher modeling of motivationally beneficial forms of private speech.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Children often speak to themselves aloud during daily activities at home, school, and on playgrounds. This audible self-talk, or private speech, has been studied from a Vygotskian perspective as a tool for thinking, planning, and self-regulation (for a review, see Winsler, 2009). These studies and analyses (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Wertsch & Stone, 1985; Winsler & Naglieri, 2003; Winsler, Diaz, & Montero, 1997) have generally supported Vygotsky's (1934/1986) seminal argument that private speech originates in social speech and interaction, gradually becomes internalized (as silent, inner speech), and is vital to the development of higher psychological processes such as verbal thought, metacognition, and self-regulation. Vygotsky (1930–1935/1978) interpreted the emergence of private speech as marking a radical and pervasive reorganization of children's cognition. In today's terminology we

would say that Vygotsky predicted domain-general development of verbal mediation (Al-Namlah, Fernyhough, & Meins, 2006), and this idea is supported by children's use of private speech during a wide range of cognitive activity, including problem-solving, executive function tasks, and language and math schoolwork (Lidstone, Meins, & Fernyhough, 2011).

Impressive empirical support for private speech as a tool for mediating cognition has led to expanded consideration of its other potential uses. One recent question is whether private speech is also a tool for motivation, helping children to mediate motivational processes and internalize motivational orientations. To address this question, Atencio and Montero (2009) elaborated the theoretical and empirical links between private speech and motivation, building on Vygotsky's position that the development of motivation, like cognition, is socially and verbally mediated. Studies in this promising area of investigation include de Dios and Montero (2003), who found that persistence on moderately difficult tasks increased when children used more frequent motivational and cognitive private speech. Chiu and Alexander (2000) found that

E-mail address: jsawyer@gradcenter.cuny.edu

preschoolers' mastery motivation (persistence in striving for challenging goals) related to their use of metacognitive private speech. Because motivation, or "the process whereby goal-directed behavior is energized and sustained" (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 49), is so central to human activity, the nature of its apparent connection with private speech merits further investigation. Private speech tends to peak during the preschool years, before becoming less frequent and partially internalized (e.g. shorter phrases, inaudible muttering) around age five and six (Winsler, 2009), making preschool an opportune and developmentally significant period in which to study this phenomenon.

It is important to investigate preschoolers' private speech and motivational processes in specific contexts that are relevant to their education and development. This is because motivation appears to be heavily context-dependent, as proposed by self-determination theory (SDT). SDT is a theory of motivation that emphasizes that human beings can be agentic and inspired, or disengaged and alienated, due in large measure to their social conditions of development (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). To gain a more contextualized picture of how private speech relates to motivation, the present study examined this relation in two experimental conditions reflecting common but divergent characteristics of preschool pedagogical settings. Traditional preschools, while not emphasizing play to the extent that modern Vygotskian programs do (e.g. *Tools of the Mind*; Bodrova & Leong, 2009), have largely been associated with a play-based, child-centered approach. Vygotsky regarded sociodramatic play (pretend role-play) as the most beneficial, or "leading" activity for preschoolers' overall development, and a key source for the development of motivation and agency.

Vygotsky asserted that play draws children beyond their current limits, creating a zone of proximal development in which they can perform beyond their typical capacities in non-play activity: "In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play, it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (p. 16). Within cultural-historical activity theory, the leading activity is not necessarily the most frequent activity at any given age, but is the activity through which the most important social and psychological changes occur (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003). For preschoolers in industrial societies, play is the central source of novelty and developmental change (Leontiev, 1981). Research since Vygotsky's era has reported a multitude of benefits associated with play, including enhanced creativity, problem solving, reasoning, social cognition, social skills, language, narrative skills, and self-regulation (Lillard et al., 2013).

Despite this theoretical and empirical support, play is being eliminated from preschool and early childhood settings at an alarming rate (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010). Play-oriented programs have been crowded out or dismissed as obsolete, in favor of teacher-directed instruction aimed at transmission of specific academic skills, especially for working-class and low-income children (Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer, 2006). In an educational climate of declining quantity and quality of early childhood play (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005; Karpov, 2005; Russ & Dillon, 2011), the longstanding expert consensus on play's wide-ranging benefits has been questioned (Lillard et al., 2013). A growing emphasis on evaluation, outcomes, and accountability in education has propagated a more business-like, results-oriented approach to preschool pedagogy that deemphasizes the role of play and discovery (Lasser & Fite, 2011). This approach is embodied in a resurgence of highly didactic, teacher-centered preacademic programs, a form of pedagogy that has been characterized as "cognitive child labor" (Sutton-Smith, 1971, p. 13). In the midst of rapidly expanding U.S. preschool enrollment, the question of the respective merits of these pedagogical approaches for promoting children's motivation grows increasingly important. Though empirical evidence is

scarce, two naturalistic studies suggest that child-centered, play-oriented programs are more favorable for motivation than didactic, business-like programs (Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995; Stipek et al., 1998).

In sum, neo-Vygotskian theory and a smattering of empirical research suggests that play and private speech both contribute to children's development of motivation in unique ways. Nevertheless, the relative impact of playful and non-playful (business-like) contexts on preschoolers' private speech and motivational processes remains unexplored. The present study investigated this question by creating two contexts that simulated key features of these contrasting pedagogical approaches. Children's private speech, motivation, and the relations between them were then examined to illuminate how preschoolers use private speech to mediate their motivational processes in disparate pedagogical contexts.

1.1. Play and motivation

Although many theorists have viewed motivation as originating in innate drives or inherent tendencies to explore and master the environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; MacTurk & Morgan, 1995; White, 1959), Vygotsky regarded the development of motivation as a fundamentally social process, constructed through meaningful activities and relationships. Vygotskian theory maintains that sociodramatic play is a crucial social wellspring of preschoolers' motivational development. Sociodramatic play involves creating and entering an imaginary scenario, taking on pretend roles (e.g. astronaut, doctor), and playing these roles according to their social and cultural meanings (e.g. a child playing a mother rocks her baby to sleep). Children further develop agency through play by challenging, negotiating and contesting existing social roles (Stetsenko & Ho, 2015). Vygotsky posited that play creates a zone of proximal development for motivation: "Action in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives – all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development" (1933/1967, p. 16).

Post-Vygotskian researchers have conducted a handful of experiments comparing children's activity in play and non-play conditions that can be interpreted as relevant to motivation (summarized in Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013). In one such study (Manuilenko, 1975), children in a non-play situation were asked to stand still as long as possible, while those in the play situation were assigned the pretend role of a soldier guarding an important military object. Five-year old children were able to stand still much longer in the imaginary play situation than when merely told to stand still, and this result was replicated decades later (Ivanova, 2000). In another study (Istomina, 1975), children remembered more words from a "grocery list" embedded in a dramatic play session involving a grocery store than when they were simply asked to memorize the same list. It seems likely that children's enhanced persistence and performance in the play conditions is at least partly explained by increased motivation to enact pretend roles according to sociocultural meanings.

On the other hand, play's purported causal role and central importance in producing developmental benefits was recently challenged in a major review of several cognitive, social, and self-regulation outcomes (Lillard et al., 2013). This review has been criticized on grounds that the play studies selected for the review rarely featured mature sociodramatic play, the form of play held to be most beneficial for preschoolers (Bodrova et al., 2013). Nevertheless, a point of agreement between Lillard et al. (2013) and her critics is that further research is needed to deepen our understanding of play's developmental significance. Given that the post-Vygotskian studies cited above conducted no statistical anal-

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4938244>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4938244>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)