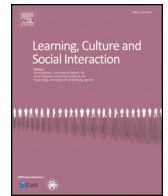


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Negotiating involvement: The emergence of a shadow break time play activity

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns the emergence of primary schoolchildren's non-regular shadow break time play. The reported study is part of a bigger project. The observational data upon which the study is based reports on a peer-group between the ages of 10 and 11, in the same school class, and their drifting in the schoolyard. The data was produced during five consecutive school days comprising 8 breaks at one Swedish primary school. A cultural historical activity theoretical analysis was carried out emphasizing the children's micro-adjustments of their courses of actions in a particular transition into a non-regular shadow break time play activity. The findings of this research show how the children negotiate involvement, co-produce the game and continuously elaborate the playful conditions into different versions of the game. The findings moreover emphasize how the negotiation here concerns the co-creation of a tool further used in co-producing play. It is argued that the children, based on negotiagency (Waermö, 2016b), co-produce the play and that negotiagency runs from the individuals' profound sociality and is to be understood as a collectividal (Stetsenko, 2005, 2013) form of agency.

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1. Introduction

Linus, Ludvig, Putte and a fourth boy from the class walk in the schoolyard right in front of the entrance to the classrooms' hallway. Linnea and Sandra enter the schoolyard through the entrance. They walk towards the open area between the red school building and the green school building, where younger children have their classrooms. They walk up to a member in the school staff who stands there, and talk to him for a short while. Linus, Ludvig, Putte and the fourth boy follow the girls but stop and stay at a distance when the girls start to talk to the adult. The boys stay at a distance until the girls leave the adult. The girls walk towards the backside of the green school building where the headmaster's office is located. The boys follow the girls, walking at a distance. (Excerpt from field notes 141104:4937)

This excerpt provides insight into the observational data which reports on two girls, Sandra and Linnea, and their peers in a Swedish primary school class and their drifting in the schoolyard during break times in fourth and fifth grade. School break times refer to interspaces in between organized scheduled lessons. At this particular school there are various games and play going on. Some children engage in regular games such as table tennis or hide-and-seek, which both have a specific cultural historical anchoring. Games and play regulated by salient cultural historical rules and norms are easy to recognize and identify.

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Usually, it is quite easy to see when children follow, break or negotiate rules in such games and play. Furthermore, it is possible to analyse how different children use the play with the same or different motives (Waermö, 2016a, 2016b).

However, how may we understand the acting of children who seem to be drifting aimlessly in the schoolyard during the break times? Within a cultural historical framework, it is assumed that no action is aimless. Hence, children drifting in the schoolyard might in a sense be seen as children engaged in some sort of activity. The drifting might refer to an activity or the drifting might be a setting for an activity. In any case, the drifters' actions are assumed to be oriented towards a motive. Drifters were noticed already in the beginning of the field work within the larger study concerning break time play where observations were made during three school terms in six separate periods (2–7 schooldays each). During the first days of observation some of the children, who obviously did not participate in regular games or play, were labelled as drifters. Initially, they were not in focus of observation but their geographic positioning was continuously noted. In particular, two drifters' patterns – Linnea's and Sandra's – indicated that the drifting might concern something else. There was a pattern concerning their movement that could not be fully explicable in terms of moving around chatting with each other, as activity. This pattern was later in the process descriptively presented in movement-maps (see Section 3.2), nevertheless already during the field work I asked myself, was it maybe indicating play? If so, what kind of play? Who participated? Linnea and Sandra were the main focus for observation during the third period of field work, comprising five consecutive schooldays, to enable further exploring this activity. This period was allocated to mainly focus on these two girls and the peers with whom they interacted. The excerpt presented in the introduction of this article reflects a short sequence of the drifting observed during the third period. When the field work proceeded it became clear that this group of children usually did not participate in regular play and games but now and then engaged in what later came to be described as a non-regular, shadow break time play activity. “Non-regular” means the play did not seem to stick to rules and pattern of a particular culturally and historically anchored game. “Shadow” break time play activity means that the play did not discern immediately clearly delineated with explicit rules, but rather successively as inconspicuously ongoing alongside more apparent games and play in the schoolyard. The play was not easily noticed and not striking.

From a cultural historical perspective, what is regarded as play? In the cultural historical field of research on play, van Oers (2010, 2012, 2014) suggests that play is a cultural historical activity with a certain activity format that is manifested as highly involved accomplishment of rule-governed activities that allows the participants a significant degree of freedom in the choice of goals, actions, objects, tools, and rules, and in making personalized versions of them. He argues that play is a quality of activities in the same sense that colour is a quality of things and furthermore states “Whether an activity will manifest itself as play depends on the intentions, values and interests of the participants in an activity” (van Oers, 2014, p. 60). Thus, according to van Oers (2012), activities can be qualified on the basis of three parameters that constitute its format:

First, the nature of any activity depends on the rules that define the activity and how the object should be treated, as well as the rules that prescribe how a role within that activity is to be accomplished. Secondly, the character of a cultural activity depends on the degrees of freedom that an actor is allowed in choosing or changing actions, tools, rules, goals. It is obvious that the process aspect of an activity is to a great extent dependent on this quality of the activity format. The extent to which the community (responsible adults) allows the participants to make their personal versions of actions, rules, tool use, etc. determines the course of the activity. Thirdly, the level of personal involvement of the actor in an activity also determines the quality of an activity, particularly its personal value for the actor, and his engagement to abide by the rules, or creatively adjust them, his willingness to endure and to spend efforts (van Oers, 2012, p. 8).

During observations, the children's non-regular drifting was identified as reflecting qualities of play. Which tools did the children use in creating this non-regular shadow break time play? Which were the rules? Which were the roles¹?

On the basis of the questions above, the aim of this article is to provide a micro level analysis of the emergence of this non-regular break time play. There is research on cultural variations of children's play (see for example Farver & Kim, 1995) and on local variations of play as well as on changes in children's play in a historical perspective (see for example Darian-Smith, 2012). In this article, variations of play refer to how a group of children create a personalized game, which alternately reflects elements of different traditional children's games. In concerning the emergence of play this article relates to sociological research on children's strategies to establish participation in play (Butler, Duncombe, Mason, & Sandford, 2016). Cultural historical research on play by Hakkarainen (2006), Hännikäinen, Singer and van Oers (2013) and van Oers (2013b) mainly concern pre-school and younger children in regular play and role play, and in classroom settings. This article attempts to expand on this research, firstly by examining cultural aspects of play in what at first glance rather appears as children's drifting, secondly by focusing older schoolchildren, and thirdly by focusing activities during school break times seen as settings that differ from classroom settings but still are part of a school activity. The exploration of the children's drifting serves to address gaps in the research on play suggested by van Oers (2013a): “further studies are needed on how decisions and evaluations of rules, allowed degrees of freedom, and involvement are negotiated, both by adults and children” (van Oers, 2013a, p. 196), and by Edwards (2005): “we still know too little about the micro level negotiations that form the evolving shape of the collective” (Edwards, 2005, p. 180). Here, “the collective” refers to the non-regular shadow break time play activity and “the evolving shape of” emphasizes there is a process by which the non-regular shadow break time play activity emerges and develops. In order to fulfil the aim of this article, two research questions were explored:

¹ Roles are here seen as a matter of division of labour (Leontiev, 1978) regarding the positions and the strategic rules of the play (van Oers, 2014).

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