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Constituting play connection with very young children: Adults' active participation in play

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ABSTRACT

A large body of educational research has focused on play as one of children's own activities, however, considerably less attention has been paid to structures and practices associated with joint play between adults and children. This article contributes to this line of research by analyzing adults' participation in joint play with very young children. The data consist of 10 rich make-believe play cases taken from 150 h of videotaped, naturally occurring interactions in a group care setting. The results show that the ability of adults to build sustained co-participation in play with very young children demands delicately timed observations, initiatives and responses with attuned and coordinated use of gesture, gaze and talk. In all, this study provides one way to study and understand better what adults are doing in practice while they are actively co-participating in play. Pedagogical implications for early childhood education are discussed.

1. Introduction

Adults' active co-participation in children's play is a special kind of pedagogical practice in the context of early childhood education (ECE). While the notion of children's play is commonsensically and sociologically understood as children's own peer culture and applied to activities that are not initiated by adults, in ECE play has also been a professional instrument and practice. Among other things, this means that adults actively engage children in play activities and take part in the joint play as play companions. However, the pedagogical position of play in the adult–child interaction is not without controversy. In fact, equivocal definitions of play and differing premises concerning the purpose of play in educational settings make it challenging for adults to decide how, when, and to what extent they should participate. This study analyzes participation in joint play between adults and children by closely observing how adults' active participation aligns with children's play actions. With this focus, our intention is to contribute to existing play research by providing a way of developing a rich description and deeper understanding of what is happening during adult–child–group interactions when adults are actively co-participating in children's play.

Previous research has pointed out that joint play, involving children and adults, is a complex cultural and pedagogical practice in which adult participation can vary in one single interactional sequence from a withdrawal to intensive observation and active co-participation (Jung, 2013; Lobman, 2006; Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2011; van Oers, 2013). Although there is shared understanding among scholars about the different roles adults can have in children's play, the studies to date have not provided solid, empirically confirmed arguments about when, how and under what premises adults should participate (van Oers, 2013). Empirical interaction studies have identified role characterizations like: 1) an observer or a behavior monitor 2) a stage manager and a provider of the material resources and 3) a play partner or a play facilitator (Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Jung, 2013; Kontos, 1999). There is also research on adult's pedagogical positioning inside and outside the play (Fleer, 2015) as well as studies on adults' questions and

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children's responses in play situations (Meacham, Vukelich, Han, & Buell, 2014; Tompkins, Zucker, Justice, & Binici, 2013). However, what these characterizations provide is a more or less static typology of different roles, positions and isolated practices, rather than analysis of how play actions are built and responded to in situ by relying on different verbal and non-verbal interactional resources and turn taking practices (Bateman, 2015; Goodwin, 2007a).

There is a large body of research on play as a situated social activity between two or more peers (e.g., Björk-Willén, 2007; Butler, 2008; Butler & Weatherall, 2006; Cobb-Moore, 2012; Corsaro, 1979; Farver, 1992; Goodwin, 2000; Goodwin, 2006; Griswold, 2007; Kyratzis, 2007; Sawyer, 1997; Sidnell, 2011; Stivers & Sidnell, 2016), however, considerably less attention has been paid to the actual structures and practices associated with joint play between adults and children. To our best knowledge, only a few studies (Bateman, 2015; Lobman, 2003, 2006) have examined how play is constituted in the moment-to-moment flow of interaction between adults and children. As pointed out by Lobman (2006) and Bateman (2015), educational study of adult-child interaction needs research designs that understand children and their significant adults as one functional unit, seeing and describing joint interactions and not just the behaviors of children or adults separately. Bateman (2015) further highlights the usefulness of data-driven approaches and fine-grained interaction analyses that can provide richer and more detailed descriptions of multidimensional and varying practices of adult-child-group play interactions. Lending support to both Bateman's and Lobman's argumentation, we want to emphasize that fine-grained interaction analyses that provide access to the actual practice through which joint play is accomplished and sustained between adults and children may clarify and extend the understanding of play in the pedagogical relationships and in this way produce important methodological and pedagogical contributions to current play research.

In early childhood education research, the notion of play has remained ambiguous for decades. Theoretically, there is a somewhat shared understanding among scholars about the key features of play, e.g. 1) spontaneity, unpredictability and improvisation 2) voluntariness and free will 3) gratification and intrinsic motivation 4) priority of process and absence of extrinsic goals and 5) imagination (e.g., Burghardt, 2011; Caillois, 1958/2001; Huizinga, 1938; Smith, 2010). Nevertheless, these theoretical characterizations alone do not produce *explanatory definition of play* and therefore offers an inadequate response to the needs of ECE theory and practice (van Oers, 2013). One reason for the lack of more detailed theoretical and practical explanations of play might be the way researcher have been framing their research focuses. Examining educational and developmental journals from 2005 to 2007, Cheng and Johnson (2010) found that play was typically not the primary research focus of the peer-reviewed articles (only 19 out of 57 selected articles), as often it was treated as a research context (22 out of 57 selected articles) or had a minor role in the research (8 out of 57). Scholars remind us that if play is not positioned as a primary focus of the study and defined as an analytical account, researchers should be cautious when making claims about play in the first place.

Cheng and Johnson's (2010) reminder is still relevant after almost a decade ago if we view play-related articles published in early childhood education journals from 2010 to 2017. It seems that play research is dividing into the study of more and more specific subcategories. For instance, the notion of make-believe play has many different conceptualizations such as *imaginary play* (Fleer, 2015), *dramatic play* (Karabon, 2017), *socio-dramatic play* (Loizou, Michaelides, & Georgiou, in press; Meacham et al., 2014; Stanton-Chapman, 2015) and *pretend play* (Gmitrova, 2013; Li, Hestenes, & Wang, 2016; Parsons & Howe, 2013) with slightly different definitions and use of analytical terminology. Also, peer play and play between adults and children is most often separated by focusing either on *children's play* (Eggum-Wilkens et al., 2014; Gastaldi, Longobardi, Pasta, & Prino, in press) and *autonomous play* (Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2011) or on *teacher-child play* (Tompkins et al., 2013; Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2011) and *guided play* (Massey, 2013). This kind of fragmentation of research focuses and varying use of analytical terminology can be inconvenient for the aim of developing deeper understanding of the foundations and basic interactional features of play in the field of ECE.

The ambiguity of the notion of play has far reaching impacts on the micro level interactions between adults and children in group care settings. Although, a number of studies have demonstrated that adults' availability and active co-participation in play can increase the duration and complexity of children's play (Bateman, 2015; Jung, 2013; Kalliala, 2011, 2014; Lobman, 2003, 2006; Singer, Nederend, Penninx, Tajik, & Boom, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009), in practical level, there is still confusion as to what play activities such as free play¹, adult-directed play and play-based learning² actually mean for the adults. In current educational research, joint play between adults and children has not been examined as an analytic account of what the participants are doing. Rather, it has loosely defined as anything that the children and adults do together during more or less structured playtime or in the presence of play materials (Kontos, 1999; Singer et al., 2014). Consequently, from the methodological and analytical perspective, the term adult-child play interaction has remained too imprecise to render a relevant account of the actual practice.

As pointed out by van Oers (2013), what remains unclear is the process of how play emerges into the flow of interaction and develops further towards sustained co-participation and joint activity between adults and children. Complexity of this process becomes evident as adults can have different kinds of orientations, positions, aims and premises that direct their interpretations of and contribution to the ongoing activity. For instance, if adults approach play from the educational point of view taking as their point of departure learning and developmental goals of an individual child or a group (*developmental pedagogy*, Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008) they will construct widely different form of social action compared to adults who position as co-equal players and

¹ With free play we mean specific periods of the day when children can choose their own activities, playmates and the duration of the activity.

² With adult-directed play and play-based learning we mean practices in which adults guide play as a way of working towards predetermined or emerging educational and developmental goals.

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