



# Huts and heartache: The affordance of playground huts for legal debate in early childhood social organisation

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the way in which four-year-old children engaged in the complex co-production of rules and social governance in their primary school playground in Wales, UK. Through an inductive investigation into children's everyday social interactions at morning break time the child's view of their spatial affordances can be revealed. These affordances are the spaces the children talk into being (Heritage, 1978) and to what end. By making explicit reference to the wooden huts in their co-production of playground rules and governance the children talked those spaces into being and made them noticeable as important places for the practice of such agency in their everyday social organisation process.

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## 1. The school playground as a place for social interaction

In order to investigate young children's social interactions independent of adult participation it is important to explore their school environment as the opportunities which this social space affords is often overlooked (Pellegrini and Blatchford, 2000). This is recognised by research which acknowledges that more needs to be done regarding the development and spread of delinquent behaviour with particular focus on peer and school factors as the majority of prior work has been limited to the teenage age group and family (Farrington et al., 2001). Although this is acknowledged as an important observation, it is argued here that perceived antisocial and prosocial behaviour should be viewed as generally *social* behaviour (Bateman and Church, 2008) and it is the occurrences within everyday social interactions which should be researched in order to reveal finely detailed information about these exchanges (Bateman, 2010). Therefore, the primary school playground offers a unique environment for research into children's social interactions as it is currently a unique place where children interact relatively free from adult presence (Pellegrini and Blatchford, 2000). However, it is important to note that children's playgrounds are designed and governed by adults and therefore dominated by adult influence. It is for that reason that it is important to investigate how the children themselves utilise their playground space on a daily basis in order to inform practice.

Moss and Petrie (2002) suggest that limited access to children's play spaces have become an issue in British society due to adult anxiety about the children they care for. Children's places have become very controlled through what has become an extreme reaction to social problems. The concept of the institutionalisation of children's space was referred to by Rasmussen (2004) who observed that children spend a majority of their time at home, school or other recreational institutions due to an

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increased reduction of children's space. This becomes further aggravated by the restrictions which adults place on children's opportunities to follow their own interests in school (Prout, 2000) and the wider society (John, 2003). The opportunity for children to independently assert power and autonomy, away from adult participation is acknowledged as affording an essential life skill to protect themselves against harm (Pellegrini and Blatchford, 2000). This independence allows children to develop a sense of agency or 'mindfulness' (Carr, 2006, p. 2). Therefore, an awareness of children's interests in their educational environment is acknowledged as imperative in early childhood curriculums such as *Te Whaariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and the Foundation Phase in Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). Due to the minimal amount of adult supervision in children's playgrounds children are given space and time to interact relatively freely and therefore have more autonomy over their actions in this space (Pellegrini and Blatchford, 2000). Research into children's utilization of their school environment is therefore imperative due to these current circumstances where children's school grounds have become a significant part of their lives (Malone and Tranter, 2003).

This therefore becomes problematic when it is recognised that children's playtime is perceived negatively by some adults who work in a supervisory capacity in the school environment (Blatchford and Sumpner, 1998). This is due to the increased levels of aggressive behaviour and racial discrimination which occur during the unsupervised time in the school playground. It has subsequently been observed that there is a suggestion that the time afforded to play in the school grounds should be minimised with the idea that it would be more productively used for extra academic work (Blatchford and Sumpner, 1998; Pellegrini and Bohn, 2005).

Therefore, research which investigates the actual everyday occurrences which fill this time and space is essential in order to produce information about how playtimes are being used by the participants themselves, rather than how it is interpreted by non-participating adults. Much of the literature regarding children's use of the school playground has involved investigations from the researcher's perspective, analysing how the playground environment influences the types of behaviour displayed by the children (e.g. Eisenbraun, 2007; Hart and Sheehan, 1986). However, other research has investigated how children utilise the playground through their interpretation of the structures and people in it (for example, Butler, 2008; Butler and Weatherall, 2006; Cromdal, 2001; Danby and Baker, 2000; Goodwin, 2006). This is achieved through observing how the children talk their environment into being (Heritage, 1984) through making reference to aspects of the environment which are important to them and observing which aspects of the primary school environment are of 'demonstrable relevance to the participants' (Schegloff, 1992b:215). Through observing these social organisation processes, more has become known about the rules and moral practices of young children (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; Cromdal, 2009). This inductive approach has proven to be imperative in revealing children's social competence through their construction of rules in relation to specific areas of their immediate environment.

Observing the children in their recreational area also makes apparent the way in which they perceive the actions of their peers to be legal or illegal when using the playground facilities. Everyday actions can be deemed as illegal or legal by participating members where legal actions, or abiding by rules, are rarely oriented to as they are a part of the smooth running of daily occurrences (Sawyer, 1997; Zimmerman, 1970). However, the use of illegal behaviour, or a refusal to adhere to rules, is observably noticeable as illegal due to these actions being responded to as such by the participants (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009). A rule is often identified as illegal through a participant's refusal to comply with it, or questioning its legitimacy.

Whether a peer's behaviour is deemed to be acceptable or not by the participating members is associated with the specific activities which are relevant to different cultural groups. Sacks (1992a, 1992b) offers further understanding of this culturally relevant behaviour through his explanation of *category bound activities* (CBA). A person can be identified as a member of a specific group or dyad through the CBA they engage in (Sacks, 1992a, 1992b; Francis and Hester, 2004). This is described as common sense knowledge and is informed by people's observation of physical and auditory interactions (Schegloff, 2007b). The use of both verbal and non-verbal actions allows members to practically demonstrate that they belong to a specific category through CBA. This social alignment through similarities can also be referred to as a display of moral rules. When discussing the concept of moral rules this article aligns with the work of Tholander and Cromdal (2011) where it is suggested that children engage in the shared values and beliefs of older generations as well as co-constructing moral rules with peers which are unfamiliar to adults. It is further stated that, 'Whatever the case may be, morality is clearly a feature of young people's social life' (Tholander and Cromdal, 2011:1). When people display a CBA it makes their membership to categories visible to other people who are observing them as, 'if you assert some moral rule, are you doing anything more than asserting your affiliation?' (Sacks, 1992a:195). This suggests that if a member agrees with a particular moral rule which is accepted as legal within a group, that member actively affiliates themselves to that group category. Equally, by disagreeing with a moral rule the member will display their disaffiliation from the group category.

Sacks (1992a, 1992b) also found that children constructed rules about limited numbers of players when they were engaging in games together. The limitation on the number of members belonging to a group is significant as, 'the system favors, by virtue of its design, smaller numbers of participants' (Sacks et al., 1974:712). More recent research into children's social play at school also reveals that children's games have a limited number of places for members (Butler, 2008). It was further recognised that when the correct number of children needed for a game was complete, any children thereafter would be excluded. The synthesis of these findings identify children's competence in organising their own social spaces through the application of rules.

As the primary school playground is accepted as a culture in its own right (e.g. Corsaro, 1985, 1997, 2003) specific CBA are oriented to as legal or illegal by the children in their play (Sacks, 1992a; Tholander and Cromdal, 2011). Rules of relevance, limited numbers of players in games, and correct CBA have been found in research studies to be examples of rules which are

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