

Freedom, flow and fairness: how children develop socially at school through outdoor play

DISCOVER
WITH
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A time of change

- ▶ Children in the UK usually start school at 4 which is part of the Foundation Stage. At age 5 or 6 they enter Year 1 and the national curriculum begins.
- ▶ **CHANGES EXPERIENCED**
- ▶ Child-led → Teacher-led
- ▶ Play-based → Work-based learning
- ▶ Active → Static
- ▶ Thematic → Subject based
- ▶ Range of skills → Reading and writing.

Our Research

- ▶ Longitudinal study (29 months) funded by UK Economic and Social Research Council (2009–2011)
 - ▶ Research focus: Does outdoor learning help to smooth the transition between Foundation Stage (FS) and Year1 (Y1)?
 - ▶ Psycho–social theoretical perspective (interaction of individual and environment)
 - ▶ **Micro–context through audio recording of target children**
 - ▶ Contextualisation through observation, interviews, visual methods
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Sample and data sets

- ▶ 2 primary schools with two class intake into Reception(FS) at aged 4 years
 - ▶ Schools with interest in outdoor learning and low to middle socioeconomic profiles. Both with variety of outdoor spaces.
 - ▶ 2 FS and 2 Y1 classes in each school (c. 240 children)
 - ▶ 4 target children from 4 FS classes followed into Y1 (16 longitudinal data sets)
 - ▶ 4 teachers and head teacher in each school (semi-structured repeated interview data)
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Theoretical frame

- ▶ Both psychological and sociocultural lenses...
 - ▶ Emotions shape our thinking (Williams 2001)
 - ▶ These mutually inform self regulation (Stoddart, 2004)
 - ▶ Learning how to get on with others requires active engagement (Ross and Rogers, 1990)
 - ▶ Pretend play and resilience (Casey et al. 2012)
 - ▶ Being outside offers increased opportunities for active social interaction (Broadhead 2009)
 - ▶ Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) self and in-group
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What does outdoors encourage?

- ▶ Freedom to pursue own lines of interest
 - ▶ Flow to sustain interest
 - ▶ Fair play? Learning how to be together
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Interruptions of flow – formulaic

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| After several minutes of silence from Kelly but much shouting from the others, she says: "You have to ask me if you want to play." | The 'rule' is that permission to join a game is made. |
| A girl replies: "Can I play?" | The ritual is followed |
| Kelly: "Of course you can." | And the expected response given |
| Another girl asks: "Is that a cake?" | An attempt at a 'merging' strategy for play |
| Kelly says: "You have to ask me if you want to play." | The rule is given but not followed up. |

Extract 4: Year 1 School A Autumn term 2009

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| <p>Another minute passes. Kelly says something about a pancake. Close by, somebody says: "You are not allowed!"</p> <p>Another minute passes. Kelly repeatedly says: "Jam, jam, jam, jam..."</p> | <p>It appears that Kelly is busy with individual play and that the access to play negotiated is not to shared narrative but common space and resources.</p> |
| <p>She then declares: "If you want to play, you have to ask."</p> | <p>The 'rule' is repeated.</p> |
| <p>To the boy she is playing with, the target child, she says: "Now, put it in the freezer."</p> | <p>The narrative is briefly shared.</p> |
| <p>An adult speaks up: "Erm, girls, can I ask you all to take them out of the bag please and put them in the box. Out of the bag, back into the box. Right".</p> | <p>The narrative is interrupted by an adult management issue and external rule about where the resources should be kept or used.</p> |

Possible benefits (and risks) of freedom

- ▶ Becoming aware of alternative perspectives
 - ▶ Integrating home, community and school
 - ▶ Developing shared ways of thinking and sense of community

 - ▶ The negative side of 'in-groups'
 - ▶ Emphasising 'sameness' not accepting difference
 - ▶ Creating alliances by exclusion of 'others'
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Fair play?

- ▶ Freedom to explore ways of being themselves
 - ▶ Freedom to explore ways of being with each other

 - ▶ Counter example – whose freedom?

 - ▶ Merging as a strategy not only for children's play and social development
 - ▶ Merging as a pedagogical strategy
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Modelling respectful interactions

- ▶ Formulaic rituals of engagement and power
 - ▶ **Authentic modelling** of ways to behave to each other through shared interests
 - ▶ Contingent to and **in the flow** of children's playful exchange
 - ▶ Children's **active** involvement in rules for and uses of spaces – a shared understanding of **'the way we do things here'**
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Some concluding thoughts...

- ▶ Micro- context of linguistic exchanges of children in the early years sheds light on their social mechanics
 - ▶ Further evidence of the agency of children and distinctions between classroom and outdoor spaces
 - ▶ Critical consideration needed about how to combine the best of highly motivated play-based learning and support public goods of curricular and social aims
 - ▶ Purposeful pedagogies
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Thank you for listening

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