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A Cultural-Historical Interpretation Using Visual Methodology

Springer

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Foreword

One of the most intriguing characteristics of the development of humanity is its capacity to adapt to changing physical and cultural environments. The plasticity of the human brain in response to current experiences and environmental constraints is now an established fact in educational science. This discovery underpins the power of the environment for human development as a source of experiences that may influence the development of neurological structures. More than ever, this also highlights the question of *which* environments should be created in order to promote optimal flourishing of human beings from the early days of their existence.

This latter question has puzzled academics for more than 20 centuries. In his dialogue on 'The Republic', Plato assertively claimed that for young children, it does not make much sense to impose experiences compulsively onto them in order to promote their learning for future development. 'Enforced learning will not stay in the mind', he says. He advised: 'Avoid compulsion and let your children's lessons take the form of play' (Plato, *The Republic*, vii, 536). For Plato, there was a pedagogical assumption underlying this claim as he supposed that the freedom of play would be the optimal condition for selecting those persons who benefit most from the freedom in play. Pedagogical values, nowadays, would not anymore support such Platonic hidden curriculum in play, but rather conceive of play and its dimension of freedom as a condition for becoming human and a political being (like the German philosopher Schiller suggested 18 centuries after Plato), or for meaningful learning, making sense and developing creative agency.

All these marvellous promises of play as a context for building experiences and promoting learning are nowadays still greeted by many educators. It is, however, not always clear on what grounds such claims are held. It often looks like a matter of belief, ideology or—as Brian Sutton-Smith once named it—'rhetorics' to assume that play is the child's natural way of existence and productive learning. And even though there is a growing body of evidence showing that play can produce culturally meaningful learning outcomes, this does not yet clarify the dynamics of play and playful learning, let alone bring the hidden pedagogical assumptions underlying the rhetorics into the open.

In order to escape from this dead end, play researchers need to invest more in developing a theory of play that can account for the pedagogical values involved, and how they work out on free play and learning and, at the same time, how they can be reconciled with situational demands and mandatory cultural influences without destroying the nature of play (as defined in the theory). In my view, it is a great contribution of the present book to focus on re-theorizing play from a *pedagogical* point of view. In such an approach attention must be given to the child's own feelings and perspectives on (cultural) activities, but also to the influence of modernity on play activity (as in the introduction of digital tools in play). The only way to solve these problems is by consistently and publicly theorizing how to conceptualize play. Early Childhood Pedagogical Play offers this challenge of re-theorizing play and takes a step ahead in understanding play and implementing playful learning in educational practices.

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Bert van Oers
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Abstract As three co-authoring academics from different cultural backgrounds, (Liang Li from China, Gloria Quiñones from Mexico, and Avis Ridgway from Australia) we find combining our different experiences and perspectives gives us courage to develop new ideas that can support making sense of the contradictions and commonalities we encounter in our field of research: early childhood pedagogy and play. Combining research endeavors and interests through our documented narratives of lived experiences, brings inventive energy to this book. By working together in this way we embrace the pedagogical value of play from different cultural and social histories, acknowledge that play has many purposes for children and thereby open the opportunity for re-theorisation.

We use and acknowledge our doctoral research (Li 2012; Quiñones 2013; Ridgway 2010b) and lived experiences as early childhood education researchers, tertiary educators and parents, to illuminate and illustrate issues we meet in relation to re-theorising play. We frame our research with original readings of cultural historical theory: (Vygotsky 1929, 1966, 1978, 1987, 1994, 1998, 2004) and later expansions (Kravtsov and Kravtsova 2008, 2009; Fleer 2010, 2013; Li 2012, 2013; Quiñones and Fleer 2011; Quiñones 2013; Ridgway 2010a; Ridgway and Quinones 2012).

Dahlberg and Moss in Taguchi (2010) write about the process of being open to cooperative and collaborative expansion of thought:

> These ideas about thought have consequences for our ideas about quality of life; quality of life comes to mean a way of living that is capable of transforming itself in relation with the forces it meets, always increasing the power and potential to welcome new potentials, opening up for creativity and invention (Dahlberg and Moss xvii cited in Taguchi 2010).

Writing together has been thoughtful, playful and a pedagogical act. We found ideas continuously forming and re-forming in imaginative ways through a process

that can only be described as cultural and historical alchemy that crystallized into new conceptualisations of the subject of our research: pedagogy and play. We realise that instead of being thought about separately as '*pedagogy*' (the art and science of education), and '*play*' (variously understood and misunderstood), it is conceptually helpful to think holistically about their relationship, hence we prefer and use the term *pedagogical play* rather than *pedagogy and play*.

1.1 Why Use Cultural Historical Theory for Re-theorising Play?

Our shared scholarship in cultural-historical theory offers us an obvious tool for understanding how learning and playful activity in early childhood are influenced socially, politically, culturally, aesthetically and historically. Scholars of cultural-historical theory (e.g. Lindqvist 2003) see Vygotsky's original work as foundational to understanding play as the source of the child's development of abstract and symbolic thinking (higher mental functions).

> A child learns to consciously recognize his own actions and becomes aware that every object has meaning. From the point of view of development, the fact of creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought (Vygotsky 1966, p. 17).

Vygotskian scholars bring their own interpretative skills to expand on Vygotsky's original works and this is why re-theorising is so important for advancing contemporary thinking about pedagogy and play in early childhood education (van Oers 1999). Cultural historical theory provides us with an interpretative and experimental space and freedom to re-theorise pedagogy and play in contemporary early childhood education which, for us, embraces the upbringing of young children from birth to eight years. In addition, we keep in mind the demands of relevant framework documents provided through governance structures.

In our research with young children we always take the perspective that children are clever.

Hans Christian Andersen, Danish author of many fairy tales and famous for his literary imagination, writes in 'The Philosopher's Stone':

> Like all children they loved to hear stories related to them, and their father told them many things which other children would not have understood; but these were as clever as most grown up people are among us (Owens 1996, p. 295).

There are many surprises in *Early Childhood Pedagogical Play*. We take a special interest in babyhood and toddler years and include narrative examples covering the whole early childhood period (birth to eight). In Chap. 10 the playful activity of two babies is closely recorded. Their numerous playful exchanges are used to begin theorisation of *conceptual reciprocity* as a starting point for learning about and developing friendship. We frequently examine play from the child's

perspective throughout this book and it culminates with an illustrative conceptual diagram to support our experiences of re-theorising play.

In examining play from a child's perspective through rich examples, our contemporary conceptualisations of pedagogical play are brought to life. As the following chapters unfold we invite all concerned with early childhood education to re-theorise the kinds of habitual play pedagogy present in familiar notions such as free-play, maturational play, or themed play. Our research shows that when play is framed pedagogically children's learning is evident throughout early childhood.

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Chapter 2
Re-theorising Play as Pedagogical

Abstract *Early Childhood Pedagogical Play* re-theorizes the relationship of pedagogy and play as *pedagogical play* which we suggest is characterised by *conceptual reciprocity* (a pedagogical approach for supporting children's academic learning through joint play) and *agentic imagination* (a concept that when present in play, affords the child's motives and imagination, a critical role in learning and development). We bring these new concepts to life using a cultural-historical approach to analysis of play, supported in each chapter by the use of case studies with visual narratives used as a research method for re-theorising play as being pedagogical.

Keywords Conceptual reciprocity · Agentic imagination · Culturally diverse · Playful event · Role play · Play theorists · Institutional practices · Political landscape of play

2.1 Introduction

At this point we draw attention to the Chap. 2 illustration because it represents our cultural-historical approach in action; an approach that involves accounting for inclusive and culturally diverse thinking. Being three authors writing together, we use widely varied examples, including transcripts and visual images from our original research, to narrate, illustrate and support our analysis of play as learning. In the process of collaboratively writing each chapter of this book, the multiple perspectives represented in the illustration lead us to discuss the following question: What is a cultural-historical approach to analysing pedagogical play?

When a cultural-historical approach is applied to understanding pedagogical play we always include the whole context of a playful event. We *acknowledge the presence of the child's cultural context in order to bring better understanding of their play.* Children from different countries, will play differently for many reasons that may include levels of provision of resources, local cultural beliefs about play and specific pedagogical practices. The inclusion and acknowledgement of social, cultural and historical contexts gives viability and value to understanding play from both child and adult perspectives which we believe is important for the child's learning and development. In our thinking about pedagogical play we also include the relationships that children and adults have with human and non human others and any connections with artefacts and the material environment.

Over the last decade notable cultural-historical scholars including (Elkonin 2005a, b; Kravtsova 2008; Hedegaard 2005, 2008; Gonzalez Rey 2011; Fleer 2010; van Oers 2013a) inspired by Vygotsky's translated works (1929, 1966a, 1978, 1987, 1994, 1998, 2004) have each turned their research attention to matters around young children's learning and development. It is interesting to note that Vygotsky's theories were formed in a period of great social change that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917. In this time Vygotsky immersed himself in an intellectual and cultural life where his ideas were expressed and exchanged with European and Western cultures. This was also the time of great cultural richness and intellectual flowering in Russia, a time in fact, when Pasternak created poetry, Shostakovich composed, Chagall painted, Diagliev danced, Eisenstein filmed, Pavlov researched stimulus-response in dogs, Nabokov produced novels and Vygotsky proposed his theory of social formation of mind. The growing impact of Vygotsky's legacy and the historical relevance of his work have been written about by many scholars including Cole (1995), Edwards and D'Arcy (2004) and Veresov (2006). Vygotsky's work is based on the application of the Marxist dialectical historical material approach, which focuses on the historical, cultural and social roots of cognition and emotion development, asserting that a person's development must be effective within the cultural-historical environment.

Taking a cultural-historical approach to the task of re-theorising play as pedagogical also means accounting for different environments, cultural beliefs and the effect and affect of these on children's learning and development. Bert van Oers has focused for example on pedagogical value in playful activity. His work showed effective learning in early childhood as being a characteristic of shared playful activity (van Oers 2013a, b). Van Oers re-conceptualised role-play on the basis of cultural-historical theory, rejecting developmentalism and proposed the relevance of role play for cultural development. He urged educators to guide young children, encourage choices and question themselves as to what is the best they can offer to children in their professional work. In order to emphasize the important pedagogical value of educators and children playing in roles (where personal and social rules may be enacted), van Oers also brought attention to the notion of *degrees of freedom* evident in choices made when a role is being played. He showed that playful activity involved negotiation between participants and any negotiation can be a site for pedagogical opportunity.

In thinking about playful activity he wrote:

> it is definitely important to study both adults' and children's perspectives on activities that are theoretically construed as play. In particular, 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 2013b, p. 196).

Hedegaard et al. (2012) represent examples of cultural-historical scholars whose research builds on the seminal work of Russian scholar Lev Vygotsky (1896–1938). Hedegaard et al. (2012) found in their research (particularly with children from immigrant families), that learning happens when activities change the social relations in a pedagogical practice and thereby give further possibilities for new activities. She takes the view that development occurs when learning takes place across different institutional practices (and this includes the home as a place of 'institutional practices') and qualitatively changes the relations in all practices the child has participated in. When using a cultural-historical approach in research we look for the changes in context and relations evident in children's play activity in order to find where and if learning happens.

2.2 Why Use Cultural-Historical Theory Today?

One of the strong reasons for using cultural-historical theory is that it is not a reductive or static theory but renewable and expansive. Cultural-historical theory has conceptualized human development in relational and open-ended terms, and this, represents a fresh world-view for research into child development.

The intention of this book is to take a cultural-historical approach to thinking about play and learning. It became clear in our research that learning, as Vygotsky (1978) had proposed, was much more than a process that took place in individual minds; it was a social phenomenon based in the external circumstances of the child's everyday life and times.

Vygotsky argued that the dynamic developmental process resulted from the individual's interactions in the social and cultural context, which is the fundamental difference between human beings and animals (Minick 1987). The social interaction is a key concept of a cultural-historical approach. At times, visual narratives are used throughout this book to help illustrate children's social interaction with others in play and develop our analysis of children's play experiences in their daily life circumstances including participation across different institutional contexts (home, centre/school, community). Our examples help to re-shape, change, enhance, extend and even transform thinking about pedagogical play in its multi-cultural, multi-layered contexts and complexities, and overcome common misconceptions of what play means for babies, young children, families and educators.

2.3 Political Landscape of Play

We understand that early childhood education is a political endeavour because it always reflects particular values, beliefs, as well as economic and social conditions of its time and place in history. Elkonin (2005a, b) who examined the sources and nature of role-play noted that the origin of role play was social, linked historically to community and family life and the child's place in the everyday activities of that life: '*the nature of children*'*s play can be understood only by relating play to the child*'*s life in society*' (2005a, p. 57). In addition, van Oers (2013c) realised the political context of early childhood when he stated that educators had a pedagogical responsibility in their work, to make choices for quality provision but that tensions would arise in the choices made as '*all educational practices should now be considered basically cultural-political constructions*' (p. 180).

The essence of recent guides and texts for early childhood educators (e.g. Allen and Cowdery 2012), is to encourage early childhood educators to give thought to how children are included and what children are learning in play-based curriculum. In Australia for example, outcomes for children's learning are stated in a mandated framework,—the Early Years Learning Framework—developed by the Australian Government through what was then the Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR 2009). In other words, the whole notion of pedagogical play is clearly on the agenda for quality provision of early childhood education.

We read in published support booklets, about different types of play e.g. Role Play (Harries and Raban 2011) and Sensory Play (Gascoyne and Raban 2012). In a series of practice based 'how to' booklets published on 'Play in the Early Years' designed to support Australian educators in reframing their work with a mandated play-based curriculum, we noted an emphasis on elevating the pedagogical role of play. For example readers of 'Role Play' (Harries and Raban 2011, p. 8) are informed that '*Play is not a break from learning, it is learning, and there should be rigour in play which stimulates and challenges children to develop their learning*'. In a similar vein, readers of 'Sensory Play' (Gascoyne and Raban 2012, p. 5) are reminded that '*opportunities for children to actually touch or taste are often discouraged, or limited to plastic*'. In these booklets we find efforts directed at re-thinking the role of play in young children's learning.

Re-thinking what pedagogy and play means for developing quality early childhood education and care is on the political agenda in Australia, China, Mexico and elsewhere. Early childhood curriculum changes are occurring globally (e.g. Learning and Teaching Scotland 2010) and in Australia have been brought about by the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR 2009).

Political changes to policy and practice always have consequences for early childhood professionals, pre-service teachers and families who are expected to build new understandings about how play-based curriculum may be enacted in daily interactions with young children. The political landscape clearly makes new demands on educators in the early childhood field to reframe their professional work.

It is important to understand play in contemporary times and to understand play we need to have some knowledge about how it has been theorised in the past. Play is variously interpreted (Wood 2013; Singer 2013; Hedges 2014; Pramling-Samuelsson and Fleer 2009) and to illustrate this point we have created a brief summary of past influential play theorists and theories.

Table 2.1 overview has follow up references for detailed information, as our intention is to flesh out the new insights brought by cultural—historical views on play and acknowledge influential play theorists

In an historical overview of the foundations of best practices in early childhood education, Follari (2011), wrote that '*Piaget valued the role of experience as well as the internal processes engaged in by the child on his or her quest to know the world*' (p. 41) but that the work of Vygotsky (1978) has taken researchers '*beyond the theories of Piaget*' (p. 41). Contemporary theories of play are characterised by new cultural-historical approaches to research (Hedegaard 2005; Siraj-Blatchford 2007; Kravtsova 2008; Rogers and Evans 2008; Fleer 2010; Singer 2013; van Oers 2013b) that show how children's play is uncultured and institutionally contextualised and therefore lead to thinking more about the pedagogical relationships that exist in play experiences. The potential for the child's learning is at the heart of our re-theorisation of play as pedagogical.

For a useful summary about defining play we found Pramling-Samuelsson and Fleer's work (2009) to be both international in scope, and most comprehensive.

2.4 Cultural-Historical Conceptualisation of Play

In thinking about play in cultural-historical terms, we used Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the *imaginary situation* as being a defining characteristic of all play:

> *… in establishing criteria for distinguishing a child's play from other forms of activity, we conclude that in play a child creates an imaginary situation* (1978, p. 934)

We understand that play for children is a cultural and historical construction and that imagination is present and intact in the highly varied situations and spaces that children find themselves in. In different cultures and spaces, play is understood differently. For example, in a rural community in the north of Mexico children have open spaces and very few resources but they are able to imagine and play with the objects available to them.

In order to discuss the pedagogical play opportunities for educators we need to think more about the value of children's imagination. We use a cultural-historical approach to analyse how a young child always learns to play within their own cultural and social context. Their context may include human activity related to cultural signs, symbols, language systems, objects, values and rituals that are best understood '*when investigated in their historical development*' (John-Steiner and Mahn 2006, p. 2).