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Sophie Jane Alcock

Young Children Playing

Relational Approaches to Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Settings

Springer

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Volume 12

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Sophie Jane Alcock
Victoria University of Wellington
Wellington, New Zealand

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Foreword

In *Separation and Creativity* (1999), psychoanalyst Maud Mannoni notes that "[a]n area of play is necessary between the subject and the other so that the imagination can be accepted and the subject can take up speech" (p. 102). In my own work as a child analyst, I constantly see children who lose the vitality of language and miss out on opportunities to develop a fertile imagination because of the constricted contours of the emotional environment of schooling, even in the earliest years. This cannot be attributed to the callousness or indifference of teachers. Rather, as Vivian Paley demonstrated in *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* (2005), the increasing shift toward accountability and putatively *evidence-based practices* has sharply delimited the space in North American schools in which there is room for play, fantasy, or even conversation. The pressure from high-stakes testing is now infiltrating even preschools, with an increasing push toward sedentary, worksheet-based tasks rather than experiential learning, social interchange, and fantasy play. And what of those young children who lack the cultural capital and sophistication to sit for hours engaged in "academic" tasks? On May 16, 2015, the *New York Times* reported that more than 10,000 two- and three-year-old children in the United States are currently being medicated for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Tellingly, the medication is administered to children of families who are economically marginal. Is this repression our best answer to a young child's demand for engagement, activity, and presence? Sophie Alcock's work in this book is motivated by concerns that the push for an academicized curriculum, and an accompanying focus on rote learning and test preparation, is beginning to infiltrate early education in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The fault does not lie entirely with policymakers and bureaucrats, however. Early education is built upon principles drawn from developmental psychology, a field of study that has persisted in viewing the child as a decontextualized, narrowly cognitive being. There are few nods in developmental psychology to the social nature of children; to the embeddedness of thought in social praxis and performance; to the intrinsic connections between thought, emotion, fantasy, and physicality; or to the

possibility of an unconscious. This is the reductionist doctrine our teachers are taught. The ideology of early childhood teacher education, constructed on a developmental psychology foundation, often dresses its curriculum in a humanistic rhetoric of care, but underneath children are viewed as atomized, culture-free, and needing indoctrination into predetermined forms of knowledge and ways of being. The rhetoric of the curriculum appears designed to appeal to the altruism of teachers and the aspirations of parents for love and care and then to betray them both with an implementation that can leave children annihilated, teachers dispirited, and parents pressuring their children to become winners in an achievement race where some will be winners and many will be losers.

Child psychoanalysis is a field of study that has made an enormous contribution to our understanding of the emotional experiences of children and the harmful ways in which the mechanisms we have created for indoctrinating children into the symbolic worlds of school learning, behavioral conformity, and the singular pursuit of academic "excellence" through performance on tests create an endless set of *demands* that squelch the possibility of a child experiencing *desire*, simply because their is no time or space for the child to experience being and becoming. The demand from schools that insist that a child *be a certain way* as opposed to experiencing *being* offers a prescription that is the inverse of what psychoanalysts and all good teachers of young children know to be facilitative of child growth. What of the possibilities of the existential encounter between a young child and a curious and passionate adult? What if instead of a place structured by obligations and demands, schooling became a place for *meeting*? What if what the child needs from us is not an expectation, an obligation, a directive, or an answer but an invitation to pose questions and experience unencumbered thought? If a child's life matters existentially, surely some thought needs to be given to the provision for *existential meeting*. Is it possible for a pedagogic space to offer invitation, hospitality, and phenomenological validation of personhood? Surely the existential mirroring that comes from *being in relation* is restorative and promotes personhood. A child's subjectivity can be *animated* by what psychoanalysts call a holding and reflective environment. Similarly, by extending such holding and validation to children in a group, the children come to experience the powerful possibilities of a community of learners or more precisely the possibility of a group of people who experience communion with each other.

It is these weighty matters that are of concern to Sophie Alcock in this moving work. Using a sympathetic psychoanalytic frame of reference, she brings us into the room with children as they seek communion and validation and as they reach toward question, desire, and possibility. As Maud Mannoni noted in *Separation and Creativity*, "The more painful reality is for the child, the more important is the ability of the parents to dream along with him [sic] of a different world in which the wondrous has its rightful place, its place as the inspiration for the poet and the storyteller in search of the lost language of childhood" (1999, p. 156). These words are even more true for those wondrous and often underappreciated care workers and

teachers, who seek to devote their professional lives to assisting young children in holding onto the precious gift of wonder and possibility. I hope this book will give such teachers courage and heart to stay true to this important mission.

Adelphi University
New York, NY, USA

Michael O'Loughlin

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Part I
Introduction and Methods: Relating and Feelings at the Heart of Play

Framing: Young Children Relating and Playing

Abstract Young children's emotional wellbeing in early childhood care and education settings is the overarching focus of this book. Children's play is at its heart. Narrative events, thematically arranged and presented throughout the chapters of this four-part book, illustrate issues related to emotional wellbeing in young children playing and relating, in ECCE settings in Aotearoa- New Zealand. Themes, issues, and the case study settings are introduced in Part I. Parts II and III respectively explore significant themes and theory through narrative events that are grounded in two research projects. Chapter titles and headings pick up on the complexities observed in these play-based events.

Introduction

Young children's emotional wellbeing in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings is the overarching focus of this book. Children's play is at its heart. Narrative events, thematically arranged and presented throughout the chapters of this four-part book, illustrate issues related to emotional wellbeing in young children playing and relating, in ECCE settings in Aotearoa- New Zealand. Themes, issues, and the case study settings are introduced in Part I. Parts II and III respectively explore significant themes and theory through narrative events that are grounded in two research projects. Chapter titles and headings pick up on the complexities observed in these play-based events. Thus headings address: the intersubjective in-between-ness in children's playfulness; words and musicality connecting children playfully together; children as relationally becoming subjects, imagining and playing; feelings felt in bodies; relational fields and holding environments. Events illuminate these broad issues and themes by illustrating children moving and relating with feeling, playing and alive to the world.

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Why Explore Young Children's Relationality, Play and Playfulness?

I vividly recall from many years ago, 3 year old Cecily arriving at kindergarten and proudly announcing: "my dad called me a silly sausage!", to which I responded with something like: "oh and what did you do?". "I called him a silly potato". Cecily giggled as she told me. I remember her feelings of triumph, her loud proud voice and small yet staunch body stance, combined with a tone of clever satisfaction and my open warmth towards her. I felt almost honoured at being accepted and in this sense included in her story. It is these feelings that I recall most intensely; they gave sense and vitality to her cleverly meaningful and playful words. This short story overflows with potential interpretations and implications yet it was the emotional-feeling tone in this event that struck me most then and that causes me to remember it now. I still love engaging with children in such playful child initiated and affirming ways. Emotions, thoughts and feelings in children's play are thus a central focus in this book.

As an early childhood teacher, researcher and academic I am attracted to young children's play, perhaps following the playful child in me. Children, like young animals everywhere play, unless severely traumatised. It is the feelings in play that intrigue me. Play is relational; it involves children connecting within themselves and with others in historical and cultural contexts that include the physical environment as well as fields of feelings that extend well beyond the physical place of play. Hence, another reason for this books' focus on young children's emotions and feelings, in playing and relating.

Cecily's playful exchange, described above, exemplifies her making connections between self, home, place and others (myself). She connected with me in the ECCE setting by describing playing with words at home and with her father. In this way she brought feelings from home into the ECCE setting, actively connecting these different places and people. Though just 3 years old Cecily spoke in meaningful and complex ways that involved free association with word feelings and meanings. With wonderful open-to-the-world style Cecily playfully explored connections between word patterns. As her teacher I loved hearing her stories and gently reciprocating, inviting her expressive ways of relating, connecting and communicating.

In such fundamentally relational ways children playing together exemplify patterns of interconnectedness. The image of Indra's Net, from the Buddhist Avatamsaka Sutra, (Cleary, 1993) is a metaphor for this fundamental interconnectedness of all phenomena. Indra's Net extends infinitely in all directions. A vast network of precious jewels is attached to each of the intersecting knots of the net. Each jewel contains and reflects the image of all the other jewels so that, if you look at one, you see all the others reflected in it. Similarly each object in the world is not merely itself but involves every other object in itself: "… the beings and aeons which are as many as all the dust particles, are all present in every particle of dust." (cited by Loy, 1993, p.482). All phenomena (all matter: people, other animals, plants and things) interpenetrate, are interdependent and connected. This image of complex interconnectedness is not only a metaphor. It is also consistent with environmental

and ecological dynamic systems views of the underlying interrelatedness of matter and all living things. This intra-inter-connected awareness that I want to convey at the start of this book is fundamental to understanding young children playing together in ECCE (early childhood care and education) settings as relationally connecting within wider relationally systemic contexts (Capra, 1979).

The many diverse ways in which young children in early childhood settings interconnect through play, are presented in this book, in the form of 39 narrative-like events. These events show children (and adults) as feeling-thinking, mind-body, subjects and objects, inter and intra-connecting and communicating, while living in and with the world. They exemplify children's many ways of connecting and communicating with feelings and play, which is the central focus of this book.

Not constrained by any one theoretical or philosophical paradigm this book draws on the fields of relational psychology and socio-cultural psychology as well as play research to explore young children's relational play (Engeström, 2015; Engestrom, Reijo, & Punamaki, 1999; Fleer, 2013; Goncu, 1993; Goncu & Gaskins, 2007; Mitchell, 1991; Ogden, 2009; Paley, 1990, 2010; Stern, 1985, 2010; Trevarthen, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986, 2004; Wertsch, 1991; Winnicott, 1974). These different theoretical perspectives add to understandings and views of children's play which, by its very nature, is also full of paradoxes and inconsistencies.

Relational and socio-cultural theories share fundamentally important social constructivist beliefs that individual, social and personal realities are co-constructed in relationships with our selves, with others and with the wider world, over time. However theorists differ in the emphases they do and don't place on non-verbal, inter and intra-psychic, body-based and affective aspects of relationality. Young children's bodies exude feelings and emotions. The non-verbal, embodied and affective ways in which young children relate and play are therefore a focus in this book. And because we never really know what others think and feel, drawing on different theoretical perspectives adds depth and breadth to ways of seeing and understanding children and ourselves relationally.

In this book, it is the actual events of children playing and relating that are the primary source for illuminating understandings of children playing and relating. Theoretical interpretations are secondary, enhancing understandings in diverse ways that may also potentially change how we view children and ourselves, relationally.

Brief Introduction to Theory Informing Interpretations of Events

Activity Theory

References to socio-cultural theory have become common-place in early childhood writings over the past decade, with the important recognition that social, cultural and historical contexts are integral to people's psychological growth and that the

conditions which shape people's growth are mediated, emerge and evolve within social, historical and cultural contexts. CHAT (Cultural Historical Activity Theory) has been concisely described as: "…the study of the development of psychological functioning through social participation in socially organised practices" (Chaiklin, 2001, p. 21). Practices and activity are synonymous terms. In this book the terms *CHAT*, and *activity theory* are sometimes used interchangeably. Though the CHAT acronym sounds more distinctive, the phrase activity theory feels less intimidating and does better represent the research methods used here than does the longer, more methodologically purist, CHAT label.

The events presented throughout this book are also systems of activity, with a specific focus on young children's playful and relational activity. The events are also a central unit of analysis for investigating and interpreting children's play. Activity theory analyses emphasise the transformational, dynamic and ever-changing, artefact-mediated nature of these events.

As a simple example of how events serve as units for analysis: Cecily, introduced in paragraph two, used her body with words to reciprocally communicate her story telling with me. Our words, movements, feelings, gaze, tone, stance etc. all mediated how we related and connected together. Spoken words with body-movements and the feeling-thoughts that emerged between us are examples of the focus of analysis in events presented throughout this book. Importantly, we investigate the whole event, rather than the individual parts or participants, like Cecily, or myself, or our words without context. Thus we focus on the connecting spaces in-between people, rather than viewing people as separate individuals. This focus on connection and artefact-mediation is important for teachers, because teachers can change the connecting conditions, including the mediating artefacts, such as words, in-between children and themselves. Aware teachers can alter the ways in which children and teachers relate and therefore how and what they learn, by changing the mediating conditions. For example: how might Cecily have responded if I had ignored and not spoken with her? Words and body-talk with feelings, motivated, mediated and engaged us in communicating and connecting, furthering our relationship and her ways with language, words and stories, all of which are implicit in learning (Fleer, 2013; Goncu & Gaskins, 2007; Nicolopoulou et al. 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Paley, 1990, 2010).

This shift of researcher lens, from focusing on separate individuals to noting the felt spaces in-between and the artefacts, (signs, symbols and tools, invisible as well as visible) that mediate and connect individuals, is also a paradigm shift; it changes the way we see things. The world resembles Indra's inter-connected Net.

From an activity theory perspective interconnectedness is mediated, transmitted, transformed, co-created, via artefacts and particularly words. Culture and society evolve and change through artefact-mediated processes (Wartofsky, 1979; Wertsch, 1991). Activity theory enhances awareness of the invisible and visible spaces in-between children playing together. Furthermore it has enhanced my awareness of the invisible, yet felt, spaces in-between myself, and the children I observe. I have learned to look out for any artefacts that might be mediating children's playfulness in any number of ways, including by disrupting as well as connecting children relating and playing.