“Do You Want to See Something Goofy?”

In the play-based preschool where I taught in San Francisco, one priority is fostering children’s social development through play activities. It is never an easy task for children to play cooperatively without teachers’ assistance, but what kind of support should teachers offer?

Looking back on my six years of teaching preschool and three years of teaching kindergarten in a public school, I reflected on how teachers can help children play together. My thoughts and questions led me to explore how children attempt to enter peer group play. Experience told me that the strategies a child uses to gain access to a group of children playing together can affect the dynamics of the play and determine whether the child is accepted or rejected by the group.

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Greg and Jamal are tossing their hats in the air, trying to get them stuck in the trees and on top of the climbing structure. Edgar, who is also wearing a hat, joins in by throwing his hat up the slide. This activity goes on for about fifteen minutes, with the children commenting humorously about what their hats can do and frequently calling out, “Look at my hat!”

Aaron Neimark

Peer Culture in the Preschool Yard

This article is a wonderful example of a teacher researcher looking carefully at the sometimes hard-to-see foundations and benefits of young children’s play. At a play-based preschool, Aaron Neimark collected data on children’s invented games and looked closely at how the formation and playing out of the games reinforced the children’s sense of a social peer group. Over the course of three months, Aaron collected data on whom the children played with, their choice of games, and the manner and kind of materials and props they used. He was influenced by particular studies and ideas from the research literature on children’s play groups.

If, in early childhood education, we are to return to seeing and valuing play as a true hallmark of excellent teaching, then we will need more teacher research studies like this one. Through the efforts of teacher researchers like Aaron, we can reclaim play as a foundation for children’s growth and learning during their earliest school years.

— Daniel Meier
This article is based on a teacher research project I conducted at the preschool in spring 2005 to examine the relationship between the peer culture in a preschool class and the children’s ability to gain access to the collaborative play of other children in the school yard. At the same time I wanted to learn something new about my teaching. As part of the teacher research project, I examined how my teaching methods changed as I took into account the children’s peer culture. Thus, this study was also an action research project—a project involving teachers making changes in their practice based on what they discover through inquiry (Hatch 2002).

I addressed three questions in the study:

• How do children attempt to gain access to collaborative play activities in the play yard on their own, without teacher assistance?
• How does a child’s understanding of the peer culture help him gain access to other children’s play?
• How can teachers intervene more effectively by learning about the children’s peer culture?

Peer culture knowledge and using a sociocultural perspective

In my inquiry I used William Corsaro’s concept of peer culture to examine how children interact while playing outside in the yard (1985, 2003). Corsaro sees children as active agents in making social meaning from their play. Through their play activities, children construct their own peer culture, which he defines as “a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that kids produce and share in interaction with one another” (Corsaro 2003, 37).

The research of Rebecca Kantor and her colleagues also influenced my approaches and my research questions (Kantor, Elgas, & Fernie 1993; Fernie, Kantor, & Whaley 1995; Kantor & Fernie 2003). In their study of a preschool peer group, they found that peer culture was established by the children at the whole classroom level and in “several distinct, stable and enduring friendship groups … each with its locally constructed peer culture patterns” (Kantor, Elgas, & Fernie 1993, 127).

I used a sociocultural perspective to learn more about children’s peer cultures. Kantor and colleagues explain that “sociocultural researchers seek to understand different types of contexts … but distinctly define contexts as cultures; consequently, social interactions are viewed as having cultural meanings and, in turn, the group culture is seen as framing ongoing interactions” (1993, 129). This approach is relevant to teachers as they help children improve their ability to join collaborative play and connect with one another during self-directed play.

Methods

Participants and data collection

My main source of data was the children engaged in social play in the play yard and those attempting to join in others’ play activities. The study involved 30 children ranging in age from 3 years and 3 months to 5 years and 2 months old. Most were from middle-class families, with 33% receiving some form of financial assistance.
Their ethnicities included European American, Latino, African American, German/Peruvian American, Asian American, and Indian/Pakistani American.

The majority of the data was observations of the children’s interactions with each other, collected during outdoor play after lunch. The play yard has two climbing structures: one is a jungle gym and the other is a large wooden structure with stairs, a slide, and a steering wheel. Toward the back of the yard, two tire swings are partially covered by vegetation encroaching from a neighbor’s yard. There are also monkey bars and a small basketball hoop. The yard has areas of sand. When the children are outside in the yard, they may play in any part of the yard as long as they stay in observable areas. There are general rules for safety and to guide interactions, such as no hitting and asking others before touching something they are using.

Over 10 weeks, I observed three times a week during the afternoons, after my work shift ended. Following the approaches of Corsaro and of Kantor and her colleagues, I noted the cultural processes going on between the children and the setting, not solely individual children’s behavior. I watched closely to see what activities the children were creating on their own, without teachers’ assistance. I wanted to understand the group dynamics and what rules the children followed. For example, I learned about the important role the children’s object use played.

In addition to my formal observations of the outdoor play sessions, I also wrote down insights and informal observations while I was teaching in the morning. I kept my observational journal handy to quickly jot down what I had seen. I also recorded my thoughts and questions in a reflective teaching journal. This helped me recognize how my research question changed as the study progressed. I wrote research memos adapted from my reflective journal. The memos included events that I thought to be noteworthy from my observations, such as how one child appealed to other children by placing a plastic cone on his head in the same way they were doing. During the time I was conducting my research, I was also a graduate student at San Francisco State University. Colleagues in my university seminar and I frequently shared our research memos to gain other perspectives and to help clarify our own views.

Data were collected through:
1. Observations in the outdoor play yard
2. Reflective teaching journal
3. Research memos of noteworthy events
Data analysis

At the conclusion of the study, I had conducted thirty one observations of play sessions. I read each observation shortly after collection and sorted them into categories based on the strategies children used when attempting to join a play group. As the study progressed I indexed my data to reveal the instances in which a child who was attempting to enter a play group demonstrated that she understood the way that particular peer group played and interacted. Children did this in different ways, and one such way was by using objects according to the roles assigned by the group.

In analyzing the data, I looked for all of the incidences of object use and indexed them according to which play sessions they were from and under what circumstances the objects were used. I sometimes asked other teachers for their interpretations of the data I had collected. I found this to be of the utmost importance, as they sometimes offered different perspectives on the same raw data. These voices proved helpful in my own understandings, and the teachers I consulted felt invested in the project as collaborators.

I received some validation of my data analyses from discussions with other staff at the preschool and my colleagues at San Francisco State University. Because of the interpretive nature of the study, I found their input useful in helping me clarify my perspectives and offer them in more realistic and insightful ways. When examples occurred that did not seem to fit my theoretical framework, discussion with others was extremely helpful in shedding light on some aspects of play.

Findings and discussion

Two general findings stood out in the data. First, I learned that the ways that children used objects in the yard was an important element in the peer culture of some of the play groups. In many instances, the children used the objects in “goofy” ways—creative and imaginative ways rather than the objects’ typical or expected uses. My findings about a locally constructed “goofy culture” became essential to my study of peer culture in the yard.

Second, for some children it seemed to be more difficult to find ways to enter peer group play activities in the yard than in the classroom. Outdoor play can send ambiguous messages to children about what they are expected to do (Perry 2001). There are not always clear areas outdoors that define for children what or how they may play, unlike the art area, block area, or dress-up corner, which are usually found indoors. This is partly why many children in the preschool created such interesting and inventive games.

I offer below brief descriptions of seven of the fourteen activities the children created that highlight peer culture play patterns. Then, I analyze three episodes from a peer culture perspective. The third episode includes my own intervention as a teacher. As I learned more about the social significance of the children’s unique activities, I began to interact and intervene differently. The seven activities include the following:

Jewels—Children used colored juice tops as “jewels” and barred other children from their activity.

Power girl—A “power girl” chased around boys, who expressed both fear and excitement.

Goofy brooms—A child joined two other children in hanging toy brooms on the basketball hoop (using the toy brooms in unusual ways that defied the teachers’ intended uses).
**Conehead**—A child attempted to gain acceptance from a group of children by banging a plastic cone on his head to show an understanding of the group’s humor.

**Instant monster**—Children spontaneously took up roles of monster and runners to collectively share both excitement and fear (as in a power girl chase).

**Basketball babies**—Children pretended that basketballs were babies and placed them in a double stroller.

**Rings**—Children used plastic rings, intended for ring toss, in other ways, such as rolling them down ramps. Another child hid them to entice others to join his game.

I discuss here only the play episodes I feel are the clearest examples of the vibrant and unique peer culture in the preschool yard. For a further discussion of some of these episodes, see Meier and Henderson (2007, 66–73).

**Jewels: Children Protect Their Interactive Space**

Sara and Molly are playing with jewels (colored juice tops from the art area) on the top of the climbing structure. After a few minutes, another child, Cathy, starts to climb the structure to join the two girls. Molly shouts, “No, you can’t come up here! We’re playing here!” As Cathy begins her descent, another child climbs up and is also barred from entry.

Most early childhood educators will recognize this scenario and would intervene in different ways and with positive intentions. Certainly the children’s behavior can be seen by adults as uncooperative or selfish, raising concerns about the effects of exclusion on children (see Paley [1993] and Katch [2004]). Before I conducted this research, I would have aggressively intervened, finding ways to “make” Molly and Sara allow Cathy and other children to join their activity. However, something socially significant is happening here, beyond two children excluding another child. In the past I did not always pay close attention to the games children were playing, how well they related to one another, or the development of fledgling friendships. Through my observations in conducting this field study, however, I began to see children’s behavior during free play differently. I thought about all the times children showed this kind of protection of their play from others. Corsaro (1997) contends that “this tendency is directly related to the fragility of peer interaction, the multiple possibilities of disruption in most preschool settings, and the children’s desire to maintain control over shared activities” (p. 140).

On the one hand, I came to view this aspect of peer culture—children excluding others from their play—as crucial in deepening the social connections of the children engaged in that play. On the other hand, this behavior presents challenges to the children who attempt to gain access, as the above example with Cathy illustrates.
At times, these activities provided a way for children to join in, who otherwise might have had difficulty doing so. Goofy brooms is an example of an activity established by two children in which another child—a child who often had difficulty socializing—was able to participate:

**Goofy Brooms: Children Resist School Rules and Change Objects’ Meanings**

Greg and Juan take turns hanging child-size brooms on the basketball hoop. They laugh, and then Juan purposely falls on his bottom, exclaiming, “Ow, my butt!” He promptly receives laughing approval from Greg.

Allen sits on a nearby bench watching, perhaps aware that he is not a usual member of the group. Juan makes a joke about Allen’s sunglasses but soon follows with the inquiry, “Do you wanna see something goofy?” Before Allen can answer, Juan quickly knocks over a small chair and sits on the back of it. All three children laugh.

Allen then prances over to the basketball hoop and hangs a broom. He finds a soccer ball and another broom and uses them as a hockey stick and puck. The three boys continue these goofy performances for the next few minutes.

“Goofy Brooms” was a spontaneous play episode evolving from previous play sessions in the yard. The particular goofiness had been established over many months. Children set unwritten rules requiring a type of unique physical humor that other children had to learn in order to be accepted. The appeal of goofy brooms is partly based on the resistant nature of the play, the way the children do the wrong thing with the objects (brooms, basketball hoop, soccer ball, chair). Corsaro (1985, 2003) found that through such resistant peer culture play, children show their awareness of the adult world’s restrictiveness as compared to their own imaginative and creative worlds. They are merely finding an avenue for expression of such awareness as they also find their own ways to socially connect.

As I observed children’s outdoor play, focusing on how children try to gain access, I found that children frequently use objects to try to connect with one another. Fernie, Kantor, and Whaley (1995) discuss how objects in a preschool classroom can serve an affiliation purpose and be “entry vehicles” for children attempting to gain access. The children in “Goofy Brooms” reinterpreted the meaning of objects in ways that made sense to them. They may have first considered sweeping sand off the pavement with the brooms or sitting on the seat of the chair, but this would possibly be less socially significant to their peers. It also might not have provided an entry point for Allen to join.

As I reflected on this episode and others like it, I thought about the ways I had tried to help Allen socialize with others, with varying degrees of success. Allen was very interested in adult discussions with teachers and had a harder time playing with children. In joining goofy brooms play, Allen showed social competence by knowing what to do to be accepted by Juan and Greg. He had learned about the goofy culture of the group and showed his peer culture knowledge by abiding by
the group’s goofiness. Allen did not use the typical teacher-promoted query, “Can I play?” to try to get in. From my teaching experience and observations, asking is not a guaranteed method of joining others who are already playing, especially if they are feeling protective, as in the jewels episode.

I concluded that there was something very important about allowing peer culture play in the yard. The fact that the children believed they were resisting the rules was a significant part. I began to talk to other staff about my new perspective. The more I observed yard play, the more I began to understand how to be more effective in my interventions (besides just recognizing the importance of this kind of child-directed play).

The next example again illustrates peer culture play with objects. A child who attempts entry in an intelligent way is ignored, and I find a way to intervene within the context of the play.

Rings: An “Outsider” Uses Objects to Join Others

Matthew and Jay are playing with plastic rings (from a ring toss game), creating their own game by rolling them down the slide. Although there is a general rule about not rolling things down the slide, I want them to continue their peer culture routine. I suggest that they build ramps with plastic blocks and roll the rings down the ramps. They agree and begin the play. Another child, Ray, apparently finds this game appealing and easily joins in.

On the other side of the yard, Marc is also using rings. He puts them in trees (maybe because of a past activity where children put hats in trees) and buries them in the sand. After a few minutes, Marc approaches Matthew, Jay, and Ray and asks in a soft, high-pitched voice, “Who wants to do a scavenger hunt?” He is completely ignored, perhaps because the three boys are protecting their new ring routine or maybe because he annoys them. Whatever the reason, Marc has just expressed interest in joining the play, and I want to help him gain access.

Early childhood teachers can be effective interpreters to help children connect with one another and gain more social competence (Kemple & Jalongo 2004.) Adult intervention is especially important in the yard, because this is a place where children are often left to their own devices. I was becoming increasingly aware of how some children need teachers to help them connect with others. I believed that Marc was trying to connect in his own way, and if the others knew about his creativity with rings, they would be interested in playing with him.
I explain to Jay, Matthew, and Ray in the simplest terms what I think Marc is asking them: “It sounds like Marc is asking if you want to look for rings that he is hiding.” Matthew looks at Jay, and they drop their rings. Ray follows as they run over to other side of the yard, where Marc has hidden several rings. I ask a teacher in that area if he will help with the logistics of the scavenger hunt, and the hunt begins.

Later, as I wrote in my notebook about what had transpired, I thought about the way goofy peer culture had been transmitted through the children’s use of rings. My intervention helped Marc communicate his intentions and his understanding of the group’s peer culture. I asked the other teacher how the scavenger hunt had gone, and he said that the children enjoyed the game and Marc liked taking a leadership role by hiding the rings.

I did not believe that this activity would instantly transform Marc into a completely socially competent child, able to join any group of children. However, he showed an awareness of other children’s play that I had not noticed before. My new perspective on children’s play and on intervening had helped bring Marc’s social awareness to my attention and ultimately caused me to intervene.

Implications and reflections

The three play episodes in this article showed me that there was a real-life basis for the peer culture theories of Corsaro, Kantor and her colleagues, and others. I learned how valuable a new perspective could be for me as a teacher. As I continued to observe children playing, my understanding of their perspectives developed further and I became better able to communicate my findings to other staff and parents.

The value of using a peer culture lens

I believe that when teachers are mindful of children’s peer cultures, they will be more effective. Hubbard and Power (2003) suggest that when teachers conduct their own research, they gain power over their practice. For me, this power involved bringing the theory of peer culture perspectives into the classroom and changing my methods of intervening to recognize the importance of peer-established routines, values, and beliefs when supporting children’s social interactions. Introducing these ideas to other teachers at my school made me feel that I had truly made a connection between theory and practice. My research had inspired me to change how
When teachers know more about the ways the children naturally relate to one another and the ways they establish their own routines, teachers can make wiser decisions about how to negotiate the presence of peer culture within the classroom and the school.

I taught, and I felt empowered as I discussed these ideas with my colleagues. Ultimately, I presented my findings at education conferences, and I continue to do this type of classroom inquiry today.

Teachers in various school settings can look more closely at their own practice and learn more about it by learning about the peer cultures of their students. They can examine the ways the children’s peer cultures are recognized and given space in the context of the classroom culture. When teachers know more about the ways the children naturally relate to one another and the ways they establish their own routines, teachers can make wiser decisions about how to negotiate the presence of peer culture within the classroom and the school.

The following example shows how a teacher negotiated with the children to make space for a strong peer culture addition to the traditional celebration of children’s birthdays:

On days when we celebrate a child’s birthday, the class bakes a cake. At group time, before we display the cake and sing “Happy Birthday,” a teacher asks who helped make the cake and which ingredients they added. After a few children state that they put in eggs, flour, or baking powder, children begin to excitedly shout things like, “I put in the whole school!” or “I put in Michelle’s [a teacher] head!” or “I put in the whole Aaron [me]!” The children and the teachers then share a laugh, abiding by the peer culture.

Sometimes it seems like the children’s creative remarks go on long enough for the birthday candles to completely melt. However, the humorous peer culture practice of making silly comments about the cake has become part of the circle time routine at children’s birthday celebrations. The teachers accepted this variation initiated by the children, and they negotiated a space for it in the birthday routine, even though they expected the children to name the actual ingredients they put in the cake. The children became more invested in participating in group time on days like this, something all teachers desire.

Many of the examples I discussed in this article are typical in early childhood settings. My particular interventions may not be applicable to other situations, but teachers can benefit from considering children’s play behaviors in new ways. Teachers can reflect on approaches they use that may be less effective than they had thought them to be, such as the way they approach exclusion.

Conclusion

Do our imposed solutions when facilitating social interactions really foster peer competence in children? Allowing children more space to develop their own authentic ways to interact can be more effective in strengthening collaborative play and building their social competence with peers. Teachers should use children’s peer culture to teach social skills more effectively and to help create a more harmonious balance between school culture and peer culture.
References


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