

Is there "free play"? Example of a researcher as constructing limits and possibilities for children's actions

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Introduction

This presentation will address a question: is there “free play” among children? What does “free” play mean? Is there such a play, and how? The paper begins with an examination of the various meanings of “free“ on the basis of the Oxford English Dictionary. Then, I will present some chosen examples from empirical data to discuss these notions. The aim is to show how the researcher also participates (*even if not intended*) in constructing the limits and possibilities for children’s actions. On the other hand, children’s play is always free from some set of constraints, within the boundaries children are (re)constructing in the play.

Various meanings of free

The question “*is there “free play”?*” is provocative because this concept appears widely in the literature on the fields of early childhood education and psychology. Yet, the use of this concept varies and the meaning is not always made explicit to the reader. “Free play” may be used as an opposite to “games” or “activities created by the teacher”. “Free play” may even be a general term for any action: it can be a title given to some moments between “reading time” and a “snack time” in the written schedule of a day care centre.

I will begin this paper by returning to the definitions of “free” as presented by the Oxford English Dictionary (second edition 1989). “Free (*a., n., and adv.*)”¹ has various meanings.

¹ Search on the online version of Oxford English Dictionary (second edition 1989) resulted to 32 meanings with detailed definitions and illustrating quotations for “free (*a., n., and adv.*)”. For the purpose of this paper, I have chosen to present the ones I consider most relevant for the discussion of the notion of “free play” in child studies.

Released from ties?

Free means “*not in bondage to another*”, and “*released, loose, unrestricted*”. For people, according to the dictionary, this means that one is not in the position of a slave, but an individual who enjoys rights and liberty of action. One is “loose”, not a prisoner, but allowed to go where one wishes. If this notion of free is applied to *children*, this could mean that they are free from the *adults* (as representing the “state” or “society”). In “free play” children would hardly be seen as subjects “released from ties” to other *children*. On the contrary, the literature generally emphasizes the interaction and co-construction of meanings among children (e.g. Pedrosa 1989; Carvalho, Imperio-Hamburger & Pedrosa 1998). Play includes a continuous negotiation of “what is this play about” (e.g. Branco 1998a; 1998b; 1998c).

“Free” means to be “*released from ties, obligations, or constraints upon one's action*”. (Emphasis NR). For the purpose of this paper, this definition is particularly interesting. This definition is based on the assumption that one’s actions may be “limited”, “restricted” by something. And “free” is the opposite state. The word “*constraints*” refers to *limitations* upon action, they may be interpreted to refer to something purely “outside” the person. Later on, I will return to this term, and discuss another notion of it in relation to children’s action (Valsiner 1987). In this notion, “constrain” is not just about limiting, but *possibilities and new directions* in development. “Free” as “released from constraints” would mean an end to development.

Children are allowed to play?

If “free play” is used in the sense “children are free *to* play”, then, children are “...allowed, or permitted *to do* something” i.e. play. In the case of children in day care centre, they would be permitted to play by the adults in those institutions. Following the dictionary, “free” could also mean to be “permitted” to do something by “one’s conscience”. Along these lines, “free play” could refer to the imaginary content of the play: the play is creative, wild and out of ordinary every day life. In this sense, the word “free” is applied also in the literary or artistic composition: free as “...*not observing strict laws of form*”.

Also of interest is the notion that comes from physics and chemistry, where a “free” electron is “able to move unrestrictedly under the influence of electric and magnetic fields”. Here, “free” is never entirely “out of bondage”. Following the systemic understanding of nature, the free parts still belong to the whole as being “under the influence of electric and magnetic fields”. This notion is also returned to later on.

Spontaneous action by own choice?

Free is “***characterized by spontaneity, readiness or profuseness in action***”. This definition is also applicable to describe child’s behaviour when playing. The child is “*acting of one’s (his/her, NR) own will or choice, and not under compulsion or constraint; determining one’s own action or choice, not motivated from without.*” In this sense, free play would refer to an action, where the content and form is chosen by the child. Play is *spontaneous*, emerges almost from nowhere in whatever situation. Again, this notion of “*acting of one’s own will*” would be applicable in relation to *adults* –not in relation to other children. Within a child group, children are asked and invited to play by the others and roles are being distributed (e.g. Carvalho, Magalhães, Pontes, & Bichara 2003; Corsaro 2003; Riihelä 2000). In addition, in this definition, the word *constraint* also appears in the sense of limiting, implying that there exists a possibility to be free from all (socio-cultural-material) constraints.

Privileged world of play?

Free is “***Not burdened, not subject or liable, exempt; invested with special rights or privileges***”. In this sense, free play would not only be free of something—such as adult control in institutions, duties of work, or rules of games—it is also invested with special *rights or privileges*. “Free play” includes the “privilege” or “right” to act differently than in every day life. Within the play world something beyond the visible and “objective” reality is allowed and sought for among the children.

To summarize, free may be something or someone that is not limited and restricted. The content, form or final “product” is not already defined, but to be free is to be open to surprises. It is an emergent, spontaneous process. Free exists without pressure from “outside”, free exists when the *liberty is allowed* by something or someone. As such, “*free*” is a relational concept: “*free*” is free

in relation to something that is or was. “Free play” does not mean “unrestricted” play, but free in relation to some boundaries.

Next, I will turn to Valsiner who addresses the same question but in theoretical terms within developmental psychology.

Child-environment interdependency

Valsiner questions the notion of “free” play:

“...no play, or any behavior of any organism, can be free in principle, because all behavior is embedded in its context, which sets some limits on its freedom. Even if it is difficult to point to the constraints operating in the mother-child free play situation, the constraints are actually there; but because they are unlikely to be reached (because of the wide range of possibilities they afford), it is possible to imagine that they do not exist.” Valsiner (1987, 213).

And another quotation:

“...the child’s behavior is interdependent with the possibilities that the environment provides, and the latter is structurally organized all through ontogeny.” (ibid, 172).

These lines by Valsiner question the existence of “free” play, for even if children are allowed to play spontaneously, their play is always embedded in a socio-cultural context. The quotations above include two important formulations: the context of any behavior brings *limits on its freedom*, and at the same time, the behavior is *interdependent with the possibilities* that the environment provides. Limits and possibilities for action in the environment emerge and exist together, as two sides of the same coin. One doesn’t exist without the other. The context is organized by boundaries on play – and the act of playing creates new boundaries.

To explain theoretically this relation of person–environment, Valsiner discusses “constraining” in human development. A set of constraints (physical, cognitive, emotional, semiotic) organize the development in some, rather than another, future direction (1987, 169). In other words, *whatever* is

not possible. Constraining “*is the enabling of the process of emergence of novel phenomena through creation of temporary partitions (limits) within a field of (previously) indeterminate possibilities*” (Valsiner 1998, 50). As such, constraints are not limits/possibilities that exist somewhere “outside” the human, nor purely “inside”. The same situation may constrain the actions of one in a very different way than the other. Let’s take a simplified example: because of the height of children in relation to the objects, walls, and furniture they are not able to reach to all the objects around them. Yet, because of their size, children have particular possibilities for action: they may observe the underside of a small table and be able to construct a play under it.

In studies on children’s play, the question of constraining (creating limits and possibilities) involves also the researcher as participant in the study. The role of the researcher is particularly important to examine if the interest is on discussing “free play” from the relational perspective. The question would be: in relation to what boundaries (constructed by adults and/or children) is the play “free”? What boundaries are constructed *during* the play situation?

Research process as various choices and joint construction of data

Before presenting the empirical examples, I will present in a few words the assumptions about *doing research* applied in this paper. The starting point is that the researcher is continuously involved with the construction and reconstruction of meanings in relation to the object of the research. The “data” are not simply collected, but constructed during the research process. (Branco & Valsiner 1997; Rossetti-Ferreira, Amorim, Soares da Silva and Carvalho 2004; Valsiner 2000; Valsiner & Diriwächter 2004.) From all possible situations occurring during the day in a day care center, *some events* are selected for the recording. And even in the recording situations, many decisions had to be made in relation to what to record.

In recent literature on research on children and childhoods, questions are asked about children’s position in the studies. One of the main question has been whether the research proposals and methodological choices position children as *objects*, *subjects* -or even further - *active participants* of the research (Mauthner 1997; Christensen & James 1999; Christensen & Prout 2002; Punch 2002). Similar questions are addressed in relation to the role of the researcher, particularly in ethnographic studies (Christensen & James 1999; Christensen & Prout 2002; Corsaro 2003; Eder & Corsaro 1999; Mandell 1988).

In this paper, the researcher is seen as a participant in structuring the environment and, as such, constructing limits and possibilities for children's actions. This would occur even if the researcher would not be present in the situation, but would use a hidden camera to record children's actions (also Rutanen 2004). Here, two video recorded episodes are given to illustrate the process.

Negotiation of the limits and possibilities for actions

The examples presented here are extracted from a corpus of data constructed in 1998-1999 in one day care centre in Finland. Video recordings were made of 2-4 children (2-3-year-olds) twice a month during a seven month period. The recordings were always made with the same children. In that year, a collaborative learning project with a theme "Water" was started in the day care centre.

Example 1. Day 1 (8/13/98, duration 36min)

The situation takes place in a room where children usually take a nap after the lunch. The teacher and the researcher (me) have put a small table and two small chairs in the centre of the room. A video camera is visible in the corner of the room. A boy (2y 7mo) and a girl (2y 9mo) enter the room together with the teacher. The teacher moves the chairs a bit further from the table, and invites the children to have a seat and play. Children sit silently and look around. They also look at the basin filled with water, set on top of the table in front of them. The teacher and the researcher stay silent, observing the situation.

After about 10 minutes of looking around, the children begin to make faces and wave their hands towards each other. Soon, the movement of their hands is elaborated into a play of taking "something" from the floor, offering it to the other, and eating it. Children offer, take, and refuse to take. They laugh and make sounds, but don't use words.

In this situation, the chairs were set so close to the table, that children could not get up without pushing the chair further from the table (as they did after about 30 minutes). Yet, the chairs were at such a distance from each other, that the children could reach to each others faces. Their movement

of taking something from the floor, offering it to the other, and eating it, emerged within the limits of the physical space that children had for their movement while being seated. As was established in the beginning of the situation, along with the invitation by the teacher, they remained seated until the end of the recording. This occurred, even if the adults didn't ask for it explicitly.

Stretching and bending towards the floor and towards the other without getting up, led to a co-construction of an innovative play within the limits/possibilities of the physical space that the chairs and the table provided ². The symbolic content of the play, "eating" and offering "food", emerged within this setting which afforded this activity both by the physical structure and symbolic content (table and chairs as in meal time). The steps taken during this process of elaboration are also significant for the emergence of symbolic play. The movement of children's hands started first around their own hands (touching their fingers), then around their own mouths and faces (making faces), then towards the face of the other ("biting" the fingers of the other and offering the food).

The behaviour of the teacher and the researcher in the situation was out of the ordinary. All of a sudden we, talkative adults, were silent and sat close to a video camera. Even when it happened that we needed to say a few words, we attempted to remain silent. We whispered for we didn't want the camera to record our talk. The silence was maintained by *all the participants*. It emerged as a significant element in the setting, and it was re-established again in the following situations. This occurred even when we hoped to be able to record children's talk. When we started to pay attention, observe silently, and record with the camera, the children kept silent too.

Example 2. Day15 (4/8/1999, duration 40min)

The situation takes place also in the room where children usually take a nap. The teacher helped children to remove most of their clothes; in the situation they wear only T-shirts and pants. There is a carpet on the floor as usual. Under the carpet, the teacher and the researcher have put a black plastic tarpaulin to protect the floor from getting wet. The tarpaulin is bigger than the carpet, and it is visible from the edges. On top of the tarpaulin and carpet there are two basins filled with water and eight plastic cups of different size and colour.

² The interlinkedness of humans and material environment is discussed in detail in the field of sociology of knowledge, where *actor* status is not limited to humans, but discussed in relation to material objects too (Latour 1988; 1996; 1997; Law 1997a; 1997b).

Children approach the basins and both sit beside one of the basins. They begin to pour and scoop water from one cup to the other. After pouring and scooping for many minutes, the girl moves, touches her pantyhose, and says “Pantyhose getting wet”. She looks at the adults. The teacher says: “It’s ok, we have another pair for you to change afterwards”.

After about 30 minutes of pouring and scooping, the children change their movements in to splashing. The girl slips by accident her hand on the basin, and water splashes around. Her T-shirt gets wet. The boy begins to scoop water, and pour water on his pantyhose. The girl pours water on her arm.

Little by little both children begin to pour and splash more. They elaborate a rhythm in the splashing: both children splash water at the same time, more and more, higher and higher. Then they stop for a while and take a glance at the adults. After a glance, they continue, with more laughter and growing movements. They stop again, glance at the adults. This continues several times. The sounds of laughter get louder with the volume of their movements. More and more water is running on the floor.

Then, the children begin to pour water over their clothes. Their clothes are already wet in some parts. They take more and more water, and comment while pouring: “Here is still dry”, and pour on top of that dry part.

This splashing and pouring episode is an example of the silent negotiation of the limits/ possibilities for the actions. In everyday situations in a day care centre in Finland, pouring water on the floor or all over the clothes would probably not be allowed by the adults. Now, at the end of the year, the “everyday situation” *in this particular day care centre* had already proved to be different from the previous years. The day care centre had been elaborating a collaborative learning project, and because of that, children had had various occasions to play with water. In those situations, adults had paid attention and written down what children had said.

In this episode, children started scooping and pouring water inside the basin. Here, the setting with water, fewer clothes than in some other situations, and the plastic under the carpet *afforded* the action of splashing water. Still, there was continuous verbal and nonverbal negotiation going on

with adults. First with words: the girl made a comment about her pantyhose getting wet. A permission was given by the adult: there is another pair to change, it is okay to get wet. In this episode, “of getting wet”, there was joint co-construction as a probable direction for the actions. The invitation made by the adult was not verbal, neither explicit, but had been elaborated by the arrangements in the setting on the basis of previous events and expectations.

Towards the end of the episode, with the growing movements and excitement, the children started to look more often to the adults. They splashed, stopped, and looked. The movement started over and over, with more laughter and volume. The limits/possibilities for possible moves were negotiated during the play: even when playing “freely”, the children's acts were not “released”, or “free of bondage”, either to the adult or the material/semiotic environment (re)constructed within the play.

Conclusion

Following the definitions and examples presented in this paper, to be precise, there is no “free play”. Neither “free action of adults” without other humans, children or adults, for that matter. We are relational beings, continuously co-constructing the environment, others and ourselves in relation to others (Fogel 1993; Hermans & Kempen 1995; Rossetti-Ferreira et al. 2004). Following this dialogical position, a more relevant question would be *how* are these relations lived and updated in concrete here and now situations (with semiotic/material/ideological elements), contributing to the co-construction of actions and meanings.

The definition of “free” found in physics and chemistry (see page 2, “...*more unrestrictedly under the influence of electric and magnetic fields*”), which emphasizes the notion of relation among parts and the whole, would be applicable to emphasize this relational nature of humans.³ Even a solitary action emerges embedded within fields of meanings. We are “free” within certain limits/possibilities.

With this paper, I tried to demonstrate some concrete instances of this dynamics of *joint construction* of actions and meanings among children and adults. The researcher is not structuring the research setting as a static “frame” for children’s actions to occur. There is a negotiation over

³ Similar discussion e.g. Carvalho, Imperio-Hamburger & Pedrosa 1998.

time: a “space/field” of meanings and possible actions, in relation to the recording situations, is being co-constructed by various means. This field is not fixed, but open to surprises within the changing boundaries.

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