

Note de recherche / Research Note

*Reconceptualizing "Classroom Deviance": The Play Elements of Classroom Interactions**

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Early Childhood Education (ECE), the artfulness and skillfulness that children display and develop in play are assumed to contribute to education. Teachers of young children not only condone play, but encourage it, and orient their teaching practices to take educational advantage of it.

The central questions of our study are:

1. Is the phenomenon of children's play an appropriate starting point in a reconceptualization of behaviours commonly interpreted as "deviant" in grade levels beyond ECE? That is, does "deviant classroom behaviour" have the same or similar structural/descriptive characteristics as "play"?
2. Does the shift from "play" to "deviance" indicate a shift in teachers' interpretation of apparently similar phenomena?
3. What are the educational ramifications of such a shift in interpretation?

We are conducting a study of classroom discourse in several institutional settings to answer these questions.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY AND RÉSUMÉ OF RELATED RESEARCH

Jardine (in press) recently completed a study of the descriptive/interpretive features of children's play, showing how play is both close to life, yet isolated from it. Its features include mutual construction of and orientation

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to meaning, the identification of “insiders” and “outsiders,” phenomena of membership and exclusion, the creation and maintenance of an isolated “play-space,” secrecy and its maintenance, the lability, tension and risk of play (cf. Huizinga, 1955; Ricoeur, 1984). Moreover, play is “free” from the exigencies of the ordinary course of everyday of life. The players’ activities are constrained only by the meanings and mutual understandings constructed by the players. Therefore, the venture into play cannot be wholly understood against the normative background of the ordinary course of things, as if such a normative background of taken-for-granted meaning provided the “secret measure” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 101) of such a venture. Sutton-Smith (1984) maintains that this normative approach is common in studies of play, many of which emphasize “the way in which some measurement of play correlates with other measures of maturity or cognitive activity” (p. 60). Play is conceptualized as in the service of something other than play. The normative use of “the ordinary course of things” (often equated, in a school setting, with the teachers’ understanding of a setting) in fact reconstructs play as either an attempt to satisfy this measure, or a developmental stage on the way to such a measure, or a deviation from such a measure.

In ECE, teachers are (ideally) encouraged to see the playful, exploratory responses and actions of young children as viable and educationally relevant alternative understandings to the ordinary course of things. The meaning and educational relevance of such playful activity cannot be understood solely against the taken-for-granted understandings of the teacher. Ideally, the ECE teacher understands that playful behaviour is not a willful *deviation* from or failure to understand what a lesson or activity is about. Rather, such playful behaviour is interpreted as *precisely an attempt to understand*, precisely an attempt on the part of the child(ren) to reconstruct a lesson or activity in a way that allows it to be fully explored, understood and meaningful to them.

In a recent paper, Grahame (1986) proposed that phenomena conventionally treated as “deviant” (Cohen, 1955) or “resistant” (Willis, 1978) could more productively be regarded as forms of play. To understand their character as “play” overcomes the limiting conception of these phenomena as rule-breaking or as “opposition to control.” This proposal became the basis for a joint study, recently completed (Grahame & Jardine, in press) on the striking similarity between the playful behaviour of young children and the “deviant” classroom behaviour of students in a high-school “remedial” classroom. Proceeding as in our study of children’s play, we discovered that analyses of “deviance” often refer to successful adjustment to adult life or to classroom life as their normative standard (Cohen, 1955; Willis, 1978; Corrigan, 1979).

Building on Grahame’s field work in a remedial high school setting (at the grade 9 level), this study conceptualized play as displayed in a se-

ries of classroom discourses. Following a conversational-analytic approach, the point of departure for our analysis was the identification of Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequences in classroom talk (Heap, 1985; Mehan, 1979). Such IRF sequences are central to the social organization of classroom life and to the maintenance of its "ordinary course." We paid special attention to classroom interactions that teachers deemed problematic. These interactions bore a striking resemblance to those of children's play (Jardine, in press). Rather than interpret them *as deviations* from the normative course of the lesson (and thus as *failures* to attend to the exigencies of schooling), we propose to see these behaviours as potentially artful, skillful and very often *successful* ventures in making sense of oneself, the world, and others.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY OF THE PRESENT STUDY

1. We intend to audiotape teacher-initiated and teacher-directed lessons in grades 2, 4, and 7 and to transcribe these lessons according to the methods and maxims of conversational analysis (Heap, 1985; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Wardaugh, 1985). We have chosen these grades in order to have an adequate exploratory sample of the classes between ECE and grade 9 in our original study. We want to sample distinctive age- and stage-related instructional contexts, which might reveal significant shifts in orientation towards play.
2. We shall analyze the transcriptions with an eye to the nature and place of conversational episodes that appear problematic or disruptive in the day's lesson. Such episodes will be examined to see if the model of children's play developed from previous studies is appropriate to understanding their structure.
3. The teachers' responses to such disruptive or problematic episodes will be examined.
4. Brief, open-ended interviews will be conducted with each teacher regarding each lesson to identify the teachers' interpretations of (a) the ordinary course of the lesson, and (b) "problematic" behaviours. Although our main focus will be the displayed orientation of the teacher evident in the transcripts, these interviews will provide a valuable resource of contrast and comparison.
5. We will identify shifts or changes in the structural/descriptive character of such episodes, and in interpretive responses to such episodes over the various grade levels. Is it descriptively appropriate to consider such episodes, from grade to grade, as "playful"?

RELEVANCE OF THE PROPOSED STUDY

Our study hypothesizes the educational significance of "play" across the school years beyond ECE. It is a first foray into the complex question of the place of playful and creative exploration in education. We anticipate that careful examination of teachers' interpretive practices vis-à-vis problematic classroom behaviours will highlight their recognition of or indifference to creativity in student responses. But we anticipate that the larger problem of creativity in learning, usually formulated in psychological terms, may turn out to be linked to the handling of play as a resource for instructional interactions. Should this prove to be so, questions arise about the transition from interpretations of behaviours as "playful," to behaviour as "deviant." How, when and under what circumstances do transitions occur, and are they pedagogically warranted?

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