

Play and learning—inseparable dimensions in preschool practice

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(Received 16 September 2004)

This article is a theoretical discussion on the dimensions of learning in play and the dimensions of play in learning, using the playful interaction between children and teachers as a starting point. From an empirical study observations of two situations were chosen, one from a mealtime and one of children's play, both typical examples of playful interactions between teachers and children. The aim of the analysis was to detect and understand whether play and learning could be involved and how these dimensions might be expressed by children and teachers in the interactions. In research, as well as in the preschool practice, play and learning have been kept apart. Today the difference between these two concepts seems to be less well defined. Joy, creativity, creation of meaning and children's possibilities to control and form goals are especially pointed out as dimensions that all seem possible and important in both play and learning. Play is pointed out as an important part of the learning process, and the teacher's responsibility for play and learning has been elucidated in new curricula. Our analysis of the observations shows that although both of the situations were different in character, dimensions of play and learning were found in each of them. In our first example the act of play and learning was to follow the child, while the second one deals more with an act of both words and actions, and focuses on children's interest in order to make them involved. Encouragement, imitation and communication become prominent in both of the situations, as well as joy, creativity, creation of meaning and children's possibilities to control and form goals. The study highlights the importance of the teachers when it comes to the development of a situation of interplay, and how this situation will appear to the children. Play and learning are dimensions that stimulate each other and could be seen as an indivisible entirety, which is a part of children's experiencing, and which helps them create an understanding of their surrounding world in a lifelong process.

Keywords: *Integration; Learning; Play; Preschool; Toddlers*

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Introduction

This article aims to investigate the dimensions of learning in play and the dimensions of play in learning, using the playful interaction between children and teachers as a starting point. We want to illustrate and discuss the *didactic* aspects, which can possibly promote or alternatively prevent integration between play and learning dimensions. Initially we will briefly devise some characteristics of play and learning respectively that are of interest for this study. The starting point for our discussion is the conception that play as well as learning concerns experiencing and creating meaning of the surrounding world. Next, by using two empirical examples of playful interactions between teachers and children,¹ we will try to illustrate what happens between children and teachers in terms of play and learning. In what way might these aspects contribute to each other? Finally, the implications for practice are in focus for our discussion. What challenges might teachers be confronted with and what consequences might emerge for children's individual experiences when dimensions of play and learning are to be integrated in daily activities in preschool education?

Play and learning—dimensions in children's worlds

In research, as well as in the preschool practice, play and learning have been kept apart. Today the difference between these two concepts seems to be less well defined. Since Early Childhood Education in Sweden became part of the educational system in 1998, there have been a lot of new challenges for the teachers². One problem that has been overlooked is the expectation that teachers should integrate play and learning in the daily activity in preschool. Another challenge is that learning should be related to long-term goals even though the content in preschool has also been promoted. Traditionally, play in preschool has been considered to be an expression for children's actions and their own creation of meaning (Vygotsky, 1995; Corsaro, 1997). Even in most preschool pedagogical programmes, since the time of Fröbel until today, play has been an important aspect in the work with the children (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, forthcoming). Play has often been seen as children's work and children's natural way of acting in their surrounding world (cf. Dahlberg & Lenç Taguchi, 1994). The teachers' responsibility in regard to children's play has been 'to support, not to disturb' Children's play has not been included in the learning process, but should be protected and kept free, joyful and carefree. On the one hand play has been highly valued, and as such plays an important part in preschool. On the other hand learning has been valued as an activity affiliated to the area of school. From this premise, it followed that 'real' learning was mainly considered to take place in special activities, special moments often organised and lead by the teacher.

As already mentioned the perspective is nowadays about to change, and play and learning are looked upon as two interrelated phenomenon. Play is pointed out as an important part of the learning process, and the teacher's responsibility for play *and*

learning has been elucidated in new curricula (Department of Education, 1998a, 1998b). The curriculum for preschool places emphasis on the importance of play in children's development and learning. It is also pointed out that play and joyful learning stimulate several abilities, such as fantasy, empathy, communication, symbolic thinking as well as collaboration and problem-solving (Department of Education, 1998a, p. 9). There is also an obvious ambition to protect the children's play world—to see to it that teachers do not take over or take away children's desire to play, or even restrain children's creation of their own culture in their play in preschool. So to sensitively 'unfold' and integrate dimensions of learning in play (and vice versa) could be problematic for the teachers.

Here we have pointed out that in practice play and learning tend to be separated, although a change of this view seems to be imminent. Similar changes are becoming evident within research. Iraditionally research has separated the aspects of play and learning in a similar way as in pedagogical practice. Furthermore, research on play has focused either on the object of play or the act of play (Dau, 1999). On the one hand play has been studied as an object: what is play? On the other hand the act of play has been investigated: what happens in the play in terms of learning, change and creation of meaning?

Within research, play has been subjected to several different studies. For example, the characteristics of play have been analysed, which has led to different definitions of play. Often it is the releasing and constructive functions (cf. Huitzinga, 1955; Garvey, 1977; Schwartzman, 1987) and the creative and problem-solving aspects of play (see, for example, Vygotsky, 1995) that are emphasised. Even aspects such as power have been a subject of research, but to a lesser extent (cf. Sutton-Smith & Kelly-Byrne, 1984; Hangaard Rasmussen, 1993). By using children's own creation of meaning and learning as a starting point, play has been studied often in terms of social and cultural learning and in an extensive sense, but also regarding the potential of play as problem-solving (see, for example, Sylra *et al.*, 1976; Garvey, 1977; Åhm, 1984; Knutsdotter Olofsson, 1989; Vygotsky, 1995). Other researchers lay stress upon the fact that play is a central part of children's culture, and that the play world children live in has intrinsic value (see, for example, Corsaro, 1985; Hangaard Rasmussen, 1993). The bodily aspect of play has also been emphasised (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996), just as its communicative aspects (Bateson, 1971).

When we look at studies of learning it also becomes obvious that learning is studied mainly as a phenomenon on its own, hardly at all in relation to play (Marton & Booth, 1997; Säljö, 2000; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, forthcoming). Play has been seen as one way among many ways to learning (Socialstyrelsen, 1987, 1990). de Jonghe (2001), in her international description of the current state of research on children's play, says: 'When educators speak about play, it is mostly in this instrumental sense of play: play as a means to reach a further goal or learning result, not the inherent value of play is central in this vision' (p. 7). These visions are, according to de Jonghe, expressed in terms of learning-centred play, playful learning, pedagogical play, play-based learning, and

so on. From a scientific aspect, it might be important to maintain a distinction between play and learning. Perhaps we need these different conceptions to analyse and describe children's different life-worlds? However, we could also reflect on whether a closer relation between the conceptions play and learning could have scientific implications. Would the value of play be reduced if play becomes related to theories about learning?

With regard to these questions we have also noticed certain paradigmatic shifts within the view of development and learning (see, for example, Marton *et al.*, 1977; Pramling, 1990, 1994; Olson & Torrence, 1996; Sommer, 1997). The view of development and learning as interactive parts of human activities is increasing. As children develop they learn, and as they learn they develop. By that we could conceive of play and learning as being inseparable and also associated to children's life-world and how they experience their surrounding world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). People's way of experiencing, thinking and understanding their surrounding world is intertwined with their life-world, the world in which they live and experience, which is also social, historical and cultural.

An additional consequence of this paradigmatic shift is the idea that human beings simultaneously learn and develop individually, socially, emotionally and cognitively. Children's social and cultural experiences constitute the foundation for their learning, rather than the general development steps that have hitherto directed the research (see, for example, Cannella, 1997; Sommer, 1997; Säljö, 2001). From our point of view, learning and development could be interpreted as a link between the human beings and their world. Each child's lived experiences influence his/her way of understanding and acting in his/her surrounding world (Johansson, 1999).

Conclusively, what we focus on here is a paradigmatic shift within research on learning, which could bring about a change of the understanding of play and learning, from being seen as two separate entities towards a more integrated view. This view will also bring out the question of whether play and learning in a didactic perspective do have a stimulating effect upon each other.

The question raised here is how this change of view will affect our comprehension of how children experience and create an understanding of their surrounding world.

In what respect will it become important for the teacher to integrate play in the learning dimensions? Is the learning that takes place or could take place in the play specific, with its own characterisation and conditions? Could we, on the other hand, imagine learning without play dimensions in the preschool practice? Another aspect is that if we look upon the question from the perspective of a child, we have to ask ourselves whether play is a dimension of existence that (rightfully) belongs to the child, while learning is rather something that teachers and researchers are concerned with. For the child these dimensions are barely separated and probably not in the teacher's interaction with the child either. What didactic implications are conditional for the challenge of learning by play, and how does the learning, which also includes play dimensions, look in the preschool practice?

Children's play—to experience meaning

One point of departure for this article is to look upon children's play as a part of their own experiencing of and giving meaning to the world.

In play children experience and create a world of meaning with its own specific prerequisites and values. In play, children share their life-worlds with other children (cf. Corsaro, 1985; Damon, 1997; Johansson, 1999). Frønes (1994, 1995) emphasises that, especially in play, negotiations and renegotiations are constantly going on between children. Children's interplay is complex. Since children interact on equal conditions while the situations and the participants often change, there is no absolute right or wrong in children's play worlds. Instead rules must constantly be defined and redefined. This makes play a perfect arena for children, in which they will develop communicative ability, an ability, which Frønes points out as fundamental for children's learning and creativity. In play, children learn to know others' perspectives and gradually learn to understand them (Damon, 1983, 1990, 1997; cf. also Kärby, 2000).

Hangaard Rasmussen emphasises the bodily form of play and compares playing children's mutual understanding with a rhythmic dance. There is an implicit mutual bodily understanding in children's gestures, he says. It seems as if one child's intentions become a part of the other child's body, and the other way round (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996, see also Johansson, 1999). Hangaard Rasmussen points at the fact that children do not really start their play by first thinking and fantasising about it. This all happens simultaneously—children think, fantasise and play, all at the same time. During play, thoughts, fantasy, language and bodily expressions are constantly formed and transformed into each other. This is an interrelated continual process. A child, who joyfully yelling, throws himself on to the swing has not mentally created or visualised the swinging beforehand. The child's body, the expressions and the movements, the role and the content of the play and the space have all already been fused into a virtual field of action and meaning.

Due to Hangaard Rasmussen the context decides whether the play really is a play, and in this context the character of 'as if' constitutes a powerful element. The author is using Aristotle's conceptions 'mythos and mimesis' when he analyses play (Hangaard Rasmussen, 2002). Mimesis represents the dramatic and bodily performance or creation, while mythos represents the narrative. The play is the result of the meeting between mimesis and mythos. When the dramatic creation and the narrative fuse, the poetry of play occurs—the play is 'as if' says Hangaard Rasmussen. However, the author is critical towards a fusion of play and learning. He means that play demarcates itself from everything else and has its own characteristic. Hangaard Rasmussen looks upon learning as a psychological or subjective phenomenon directed towards the individual himself/herself, while play makes the child able to try a virtual world outside himself/herself. There is a deep existential dimension in play and the one who plays must be able to separate from his/her own self in order to learn to know his/her own self. In this process, in which children together with others search for the unknown, fostering also takes place.

Play has often been described as free and equal between children (see Piaget, 1962). In contrast to this description Johansson (1999), who has studied young children's morality, has found that power is an important feature in play and relations between children (cf. Sutton-Smith & Kelly-Byrne, 1984; Hangaard Rasmussen, 1993). Children use power in play, often starting out with the feeling of having rights in their play. Play is extremely valuable to children. The right to play, as such, is something that has to be argued for and protected. Power then becomes a tool with which the play can be defended. Power can also be a feature of the play, and by this power the limits of others' integrity could be tested (Johansson, 1999).

To sum up, it could be said that play is an important part of children's lives and their creation of meaning. In play, communication, creation and experiencing of meaning, a reciprocity and a feeling of solidarity between the children take place. The worlds children create in play are built upon children's experiences and are created within an interaction and a reciprocity, but also involve aspects such as power. It is also conceivable that play challenges creativity and problem-solving. In play children can experience their rights, participation and influence (Johansson, 1999; Williams *et al.*, 2001). As children are 'forced' to negotiate about play, test the quality of their arguments and encounter other perspectives, their experiences become visible, both to themselves and to others. In play children learn from each other, and since the children's age and experiences often vary in the play, the learning will be challenged (cf. Williams, 2001). These differences also give the children opportunities to experiment with, expand and change their play worlds.

The specific character of play

There have been many attempts to try to define play, but few of them have been successful (Lillemyr, 1995). Instead of trying to define play we have here focused on certain characteristics for play, expressed in the research already presented. The following dimensions are of special interest: the features of 'as if' in play, the play's unpredictability, its symbolic, communicative and social aspects, play as a process, play as children's experiencing of joy and meaning, as well as its bodily form and its interconnection with children's life-worlds.

Fantasy and excitement, devotion and involvement characterise play. In the play's 'as if' the child is engulfed by time and space, nothing else becomes important. Play is joyful to children; still, it also includes certain dimensions of power. Play is symbolic and communicative. That is, the child imagines or talks about something. In this communicative process we also understand play as social. Even though the child might not communicate with any real person, there is someone (a fictitious person) or something (a visualised world) to communicate with in play. In play an implicit, reciprocal bodily understanding between children is formed. The intentions of the child become a part of the other child's body, and similarly, the other way around (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996). The root of play is intertwined with the child's life-world; likewise, the content of play brings the child beyond here and now. Play has features of a process in contrast to a purposeful acting towards being productive,

even though children do solve problems when they play (something that could be seen as a purposeful dimension). What becomes important is that the child itself forms the goal. The child has an intention of what he/she is doing or is about to do (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, forthcoming). Similarly meanings and goals are established in the play. To the child the play contains both an object and an act. Simultaneously the play is both bodily and directly experienced, and thoughts, fantasy, language and bodily expressions are all intertwined.

Learning—to create meaning and to experience the world in a new way

Our purpose is not to define learning, but to characterise the type of learning that we consider to be the foundation for our Swedish curricula, and which could be defined as socio-cultural and could create meaning by its own nature (Sommer, 1997; Department of Education, 1998a,b; Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, forthcoming).

This perspective is characterised by an understanding of learning as a question of seeing, perceiving, experiencing, distinguishing or understanding something in a new and qualitatively different way, and by relating to the surrounding world in the light of this experiencing. The what and the how aspect of learning are interwoven and reciprocally dependent. Learning is dependent on children's social and cultural experiences—the child's whole life-world. In this way the child's experiencing and understanding become the foundation for new experiences and ways of creating meaning. From this point of view children are expected to be involved in their own learning. Furthermore, the child's learning is not principally comprehended as an individual performance, but presumed to be closely related to the environment and the relationships in which the child is included. The communication between the teachers and the children, as well as between the children themselves, becomes central (Williams *et al.*, 2001; Johansson, 2002, 2003). In this way learning becomes a collective and social activity, rather than an individual one. Features of learning, which today often are pointed out as the conditions and characteristics of learning, are joy and involvement. That is, children learn best when they are captured by something that occupies their involvement in such a way that the surrounding world ceases to exist—the child focuses on something he/she would like to solve or to know more about. Defined in this way, the world of play also becomes a source of learning.

Who, then, defines the goal in the learning? On the one hand there are goals to strive for in the pedagogical practice in preschool, defined by society (Department of Education, 1998a). On the other hand the view in the learning perspective already described indicates that if the whole child and his/her world are involved, the best conditions for learning are promoted. Therefore the goal must also be a part of the child's own intention. Furthermore, creativity is essential in learning; that is, to exceed and create a new meaning and understanding of the surrounding world are important aspects of the learning process (Next Generation Forum, 1999). From this viewpoint the child appears as involved and social, with intentions to create a meaning

and an understanding of his/her surrounding world. To the child, the learning has an object (a content) at the same time as it is an act.

Summary and didactic implications

Through this exposition it becomes clear that even if play and learning are different phenomena, there are also similarities regarding what is characteristic for these phenomena and which experiences they could challenge within children's worlds. Joy, creativity, creation of meaning and children's possibilities to control and form goals are especially pointed out as dimensions that all seem possible and important in both play and learning. In the view of learning that we have presented here we can see that even though play principally is associated with these positively valued aspects, it becomes obvious that these dimensions also are important prerequisites for ultimate learning. At first sight the play's 'as if' seems to be missing in the definition of learning. On the other hand, we often hear about a learning that expands and brings the learning individual beyond 'here and now'. One interesting aspect in play, which we have pointed out, is oppression and powerlessness—an aspect that often is left out, but quite often is associated with learning in negative terms, and then mostly with reference to the teacher's exertion of power (Andersson, 1999).

In a didactic perspective the teacher is of great importance in children's play and the development of the same. The teacher helps the child to 'set the scene'; that is, to create material and physical frames for different games. More recent research also points out the importance of teachers taking part in the play in a genuine and sensitive way. Since play is neither free from power, hierarchy or positioning, it requires a very sensitive teacher to help children in this learning (Johansson, 2001, 2002). When teachers take part in children's play they are signalling that play is important (Manning & Sharp, 1977). Howes and Smith (1995) also show that children form closer and stronger relationships with teachers who play with them. Furthermore, it is shown that children's play becomes more complex when teachers participate (Sylva *et al.*, 1980), and that they can stay attentive for longer periods (Hutt *et al.*, 1989). Teachers can also enrich children's play by helping them with material, ideas and practical attainments (Bennett *et al.*, 1997), and support them in their development of their own thoughts (Vygotsky, 1978). If we look upon the learning process, the importance of teachers is probably even greater. The teacher can constitute a link between the child and the surrounding world (Klein, 1989), and in this way contribute to the child's learning by helping to focus on awareness, interact with the child and challenge its thoughts and intentions (Pramling, 1994). The interaction or the dialogue confirms and challenges the child, from the aspect of senses as well as thoughts.

Empirical data

The aim of this section is to illustrate the earlier theoretical discussion with two observations, and by this enlighten the dimensions of learning in play and the dimensions

of play in learning. As a starting point we have used some examples from everyday preschool situations, in which play is involved. It becomes important to bear in mind that we are studying playful processes of interplay between children and teachers, and not the learning that takes place in children's own play where teachers are not involved. We want to analyse and discuss didactic implications, to try to understand what will happen when a teacher (separates or) integrates learning dimensions in the play and play dimensions in the learning, respectively. The object also is to examine the learning process in play, as well as to find out if and how playfulness contributes to learning.

The analyses is built upon the characteristics for play and learning as they have already been described. In this context it becomes essential to try to understand the object and the act of both play and learning, but most of all to understand teachers' actions in playful situations of interplay with children.

The following questions are of interest:

- How is the play expressed and what kind of dimensions of learning might be observed? Is there any form of play to be found in the learning situation, and in that case how is this play characterised?
- Do children show any kind of creation of meaning, and how do the teachers react to this?
- How is the power of the play distributed? Who plays? Who owns the play? Is the child allowed to keep his/her play?

In the project, from which the data used in this article are collected, 30 groups of children from all over Sweden have been involved (Johansson, 2003). The study aims to map out and illustrate the quality of preschool education with regard to young children, by studying the teachers' way of acting, the context and the organisation of the children's daily life in preschool, and to follow the children's way of experiencing, both on a group and an individual level. Video recordings have been used for the observation of the work. The interaction in the child group has been observed in some everyday situations (Johansson, 2003). From these observations we have chosen two situations, one from a mealtime and one of children's play, both typical examples of playful interactions between teachers and children. The observations were not in any way planned or arranged in advance. In one of the observations a child is initiating play during a formalised situation—the mealtime. In the other observation the point of departure is a semi-structured play situation, spontaneously initiated and supervised by a teacher. The aim of the analysis is to detect and understand whether play and learning could be involved and how these dimensions might be expressed in the interaction.

During mealtime

This preschool consists of 16 children aged between one and three-and-a-half years. Seven of them have an ethnic background other than Swedish. During the mealtime everyone is gathered in one room, sitting at three tables placed next to each other in

a row. It is cramped around the tables, and everyone can hear and see what happens in the room. At this particular lunch there are 15 children and four teachers at the table.

Suddenly Yani (3:6) discovers how the sun is reflecting off his bib, making a pattern in the ceiling. Yani laughs and looks up at the ceiling. He points and says delightedly: 'giraffe'. He turns his body back and forth, making the pattern in the ceiling come and go. All the children watch; the teachers laugh. 'Look', says one of the teachers excitedly. Adela (2:8), Amir (2:5) and Marga (1:6) cry out loudly and laugh. 'It's amazing that he saw this. Such fantasy, to see a giraffe', says the teacher delightedly. 'Children, did you see that Yani can do tricks?', she continues. Yani smiles happily and looks proud. 'Giraffe', he repeats. It is lively around the table, the children point excitedly and both children and teachers laugh.

What we first of all could ask ourselves is whether the situation described could be defined as play. If we accept the fact that a play situation is characterised by 'as if' and fantasy as our starting point, it becomes obvious that both these aspects are involved. The sun reflection in the ceiling represents something, and to the participants it looks like a giraffe. The play allows the discovery of this reflection to be something else—a metaphoric play as Hangaard Rasmussen (2002) describes it. Also excitement seems to be involved, which we can see in the eagerness and the liveliness expressed by everyone around the table. Something unexpected has happened that everyone takes an active interest in. For a moment time stops and everyone follows the reflections in the ceiling. A common creation of meaning seems to become possible.

We can also see how the teachers get involved in the children's play. Spontaneously the boy's curiosity and experiencing are being utilised. Jointly everyone takes some time to examine the boy's discovery, and the children and the teachers share the joy. In spite of all this happening during mealtime, which makes the situation somewhat confused, free scope is given to the occasion and all children are allowed to be involved. Most of all it seems that it is the joy of discovery that is made apparent in this situation. One single child's discovery becomes a collective act in which all participate and direct their attention towards, the pattern in the ceiling created by the bib. The teachers show their appreciation of the boys' discovery. They focus on his interest and encourage his initiative as well as the meaning he gives to the reflection in the ceiling. When he happily exclaims that it is a giraffe, the teachers share his joy and the other children are invited to take part in the joyful discovery. The teachers name his discovery and confirm his competence. 'It's amazing that he saw this. Such fantasy.' They also point out to the other children that Yani can create something, 'Yani can do tricks'. The situation could be interpreted as a moment of play, containing spontaneity, joy, social interaction and symbolism, in which the process of interplay is important. We could, perhaps, say that there is a common ownership of the play.

We can also look upon the situation as a joyful process of learning. The children are encouraged to observe, discover and imagine. Probably the children's taken-for-granted way of experiencing the world is affected; they become fascinated and their interest is directed towards the reflection in the ceiling. The children become occupied by the pattern in the ceiling, and their joy is evident. To describe this in other words, the children's consciousness (and life-world) focuses on an advanced

phenomenon in their surrounding world. The sun's reflection is discerned as a pattern, which forms a picture and represents a symbol for something else in the world. The situation also takes place beyond here and now Starting out from the actual situation at the dining table, both the children's and the teachers' interest becomes focused on the picture in the ceiling and its movements. Furthermore, the situation consists of both communication, experiencing and giving meaning. The teachers and the child identify the occurred phenomenon and gives it a meaning. Regardless of what this meaning might be and what occurs to the individual child, we believe that the occasion has potential for learning, which is also full of joy and reciprocity.

Whether or not the teacher adopts the perspective of play or of learning, he/she has an active role in his/her permissive and open attitude and way of encouraging and sharing focus of interest with the children.

During 'free' play

The following example is taken from a group of preschool children aged between one and three years. The children play in different rooms where they can choose different activities. The three teachers are together with the children when they play Some of the children are gathered together in the kitchen with one teacher.

One teacher sits together with three children at a table in the kitchen Nina (1:3) sits on her lap. Viktoria (1:6), a girl with physical disability sits on a high chair next to the teacher and Hilda (2:0) at the opposite side of the table. The teacher takes out five pigs and sings about the pigs while she takes them one by one and lets them walk around the table. The teacher concentrates mainly on Hilda sitting opposite her. 'The little pig should ...' At the end of the song the pig is supposed to make a sound, and the teacher encourages Hilda to sound like the pig 'It's difficult', she says and grunts as a pig. Sometimes she turns towards Viktoria and tries to involve her in the game. Viktoria is having difficulties with keeping her head straight and she pulls the table cloth 'You are more interested in that table cloth, aren't you?', says the teacher. She taps the table in front of Viktoria and calls her name. Then she puts a horse in front of Viktoria who takes the horse. The teacher is attentive to the children After a while she takes out some cows and sings the same song about cows She counts when she takes them out.

A while later comes Lisa (2:6) and Göran (3). 'Can we play too?', asks Lisa 'Sure, come here', says the teacher. She sings the song once again and then asks Lisa: 'You know this song, don't you?' 'Yes', answers Lisa 'Good, then you can help me sing'. The teacher sings and both Hilda and Lisa watch her actions and sing along with her They help her to sound like a cow. The teacher takes out a couple of cows and Lisa counts them. 'How many are they?' asks the teacher. 'Three', answers Lisa 'And how many are they now?', continues the teacher and puts one more cow on the table 'Four', Lisa replies quickly But when the teacher puts a fifth cow on the table Lisa says: 'She's stupid'. 'Is the cow stupid?', asks the teacher somewhat surprised 'Yes', says Lisa. She nods and points at the other cows 'Is this one also stupid?', asks the teacher. 'Yes', answers Lisa firmly. 'All are stupid'. 'But how come they are stupid?', asks the teacher 'They just are', answers Lisa 'But what have they done?', asks the teacher. 'They have stepped in the puddles', says Lisa watching the teacher. She looks both happy and somewhat cunning. 'I see', says the teacher as if she really understood. 'Without rubber boots?' 'Yes', replies Lisa happily 'A

lot', she continues 'Well, we are not supposed to, are we? You're absolutely right Lisa', the teacher says agreeably.

Could we call this a situation of play? Does the context contain any 'as if'? Are there any features of fantasy? Is there any space for children's worlds, their own creation of meaning? To begin with, the example seems more like a structured learning situation, even though it is a playful one. The teacher has taken out some objects for the children to play with, a farm and some animals. In this way she has tried to create opportunities for play. Since the children are quite young, she seems to find it necessary to contribute more actively to the development of the play. She names the animals and moves them around and she tries to involve the children in the play by asking them what certain animals sound like. The teacher sings all the while as she keeps her attention on each of the children. There is almost no interplay between the children, but she is acting in a way that makes all the children attentive to what happens at the table. They become interested and ask if they can join in. The situation certainly goes beyond here and now when the children imagine how the animals sound and imitate them. With the animals the teacher creates an 'as if' situation. She moves the animals to the barn where they live. The expected answers to her questions about what the animals sound like, and how many there are, are all provided. On the other hand, the created situation is performed in an imaginative way. The excitement seems to be built up by the repetition of the song and by the children's expectations of sounding like the animals at the end of each verse. The children are attracted and fascinated. The teacher's song and the play with the animals occupy their consciousness. The children participate in the situation as intended by the teachers. They sing and count and they show joy.

However, when Lisa reverse the situation, the course of events takes on another meaning (cf. Hangaard Rasmussen [1996], who talks about inversions when the unexpected happens), the situation changes and becomes more of a play. Lisa changes the given conditions. Instead of counting the animals, which is implied, she claims that 'the cow is stupid'. Instead of the children following the teacher's play, as expected, the situation is reversed. Now the teacher has to follow the child's 'as if'. The child's world appears with another kind of creation of meaning than before. The excitement increases, the cows do the forbidden. The teacher is agreeing with Lisa when she argues that the cows are stupid.

If we look upon the situation from a learning perspective, we can see how the teacher in a playful way structures the context by questioning the children. The teacher takes the initiative, but also tries to follow the children, from their perspectives, intentions and interests. The play supports this. The children are encouraged to repeat and to imitate the teacher. The teacher sings and invites the children to join in. She counts the animals, and when Lisa starts to count by herself the teacher is flexible and continues the counting game. The teacher names and gives meaning to the situation. It seems as if the teacher strives to teach the children certain facts, like numbers and how the animals sound. She does not use many questions that do not demand a 'right' answer. When Lisa initiates another dimension in the game about the cows we can see how the teacher is aware of what is happening. She starts to ask in another way.

The teacher does not control the answers any longer, but Lisa does. The question is who is in charge of the play in this context. Our interpretation is that the ownership shifts. Initially it is the teacher's, but then it becomes the child's 'property'.

Discussion

The aim of this study has been to examine and analyse dimensions of learning in play and dimensions of play in learning. Through analyses of concrete situations of interplay in preschool we have tried to illustrate and discuss didactic aspects, which might promote or restrain the interrelation between play and learning dimensions, respectively. Furthermore, we wanted to find out what might happen if teachers, in their interaction with children, separate or integrate these aspects.

The two examples that we have been analysing are different in character, but both of them are common situations in the world of preschool. Let us start with what we have called the 'what' aspect of learning and play; that is, what children spontaneously, or with the aid of teachers, direct their attention towards in these two observations. We then notice that in both examples the children are striving for an understanding of their own world. In the first observation it is the child itself who spontaneously experiences and creates meaning by discovering the reflection in the ceiling. In the second observation it is the teacher who initially tries to give meaning to the children's world by initiating the play with the animals, but this soon changes and the child takes over the initiative while the teacher adjusts herself and keeps contact with the child in her play and making it meaningful.

In the first observation it is through the child's initiative that the teachers and the other children notice the reflection of the sun. The child's experiences are captured by, and become absorbed by a phenomenon in the surrounding world. The child is permitted to stay in his experience and the teachers and the other children, sharing his joy, join him in his experiencing. The teachers contribute to the mutual experience, both by sharing it and by identifying it. In this situation we find that play and learning are integrated. The children experience something new, which they create in the situation. They go beyond what they normally do at the dining table—have a meal, and they are permitted to be playful and to fantasise. There is something beyond here and now—an 'as if'.

If we use the same starting point as Hangaard Rasmussen (2002), we can understand the situation as follows: mimesis—the dramatically, bodily creative—and mythos—the narrative—are brought together in the poetry of play. We also venture to assume that the children probably learn something, they experience something they have not experienced before!

In the second example the children are younger and the teacher tries to make them interested and engaged in something that exists in their immediate surroundings, in this case a toy farm. She plays joyfully with the animals, names them and counts them. It might seem like she wants to teach the children some facts, such as what something is called, but additionally her intention is more likely to make the children interested in, and willing to join, an interplay and a communication.

Here it also becomes important to take the children's age into consideration. All the children are very young, between 15 months and three years. This would signify that they have not yet reached the intellectual dividing line, which Piaget calls delayed imitation or a representation of reality by symbolic actions. Flavell expressed this phenomenon in the following except: 'The paramount requirement for representation is what he calls the ability to differentiate 'signifiers' from 'significates' and thereby to become capable of evolving the one to call forth or refer to the other' (1973, p. 157). This perspective highlights the fact that if we should be able to imagine something we also need to be aware of corresponding conceptions or experiences in one way or another. Perhaps that is what the teacher tries to help the children to obtain. When the child shows that she has already obtained this ability by spontaneously acting with the object in an 'as if' way and the object represents something, the teacher follows her and relates accordingly. Hangaard Rasmussen (1996) points out the fact that these two processes, to learn to name the surrounding world and to communicate in play, occur simultaneously. From the girl's play it becomes obvious that she can go beyond the situation and relate to other experiences from her life-world. The cows are not wearing rubber boots, which they are supposed to when it is raining, and they also do something forbidden—they step in the puddles. The child labels these actions; she says that the cows are stupid. Furthermore, the girl shows that she is aware that she goes beyond the existing situation in a way that might challenge the teacher. She looks at the teacher, seemingly expecting some kind of reaction.

Even in this observation it becomes difficult to distinguish between play and learning. The two young children, who sit together with the teacher when she starts to play with the farm, are probably not able to explicitly fantasise and imagine by themselves, but with some help from the teacher they gradually become more active. Moreover, it is the teacher's actions that bring the other children's attention towards the ongoing play with the farm and make them wanting to take part in the game. This contributes to the following development of the game, or a communication based upon children's experiences and conditions. Here aspects of mythos and mimesis, creation and narration, could also be seen. It becomes exciting to think that these aspects seem to be introduced by the child, and that the teacher in a sensitive way follows the girl into the world she is creating.

In our first example the act of play and learning is to follow the child, while the second one deals more with an act of both words and actions, and focuses on children's interest in order to make them involved. Encouragement, imitation and communication become prominent in both the situations.

As research has shown, the teachers play an important role in children's play, as well as in their learning. There has to be both giving and taking in the interaction between the teachers and the children, as well as between the children themselves (Sylva *et al.*, 1980; Hutt *et al.*, 1989; Johansson, 1999, 2002, 2003; Willams *et al.*, 2001). Teachers must be able to follow children in their actions, which they do in a distinct way in both the examples. Additionally, teachers must contribute with different kinds of support and challenges, which they also do in different ways in our examples.

What we have illustrated by these two observations is the importance of the teachers when it comes to the development of a situation of interplay, and how this situation will appear to the children. We claim that these teachers integrate play and learning, both in spontaneous situations and in situations in which the teacher has taken the initiative.

To consider what would happen if the teachers had separated play and learning into two different phenomena in the children's everyday life is something we can only speculate over here—even though these situations are comparable with similar ones, which Johansson (2003) specifically relates to the teachers' view of children and knowledge. Johansson found that the perspective of a child and the view of learning and knowledge that teachers embrace are crucial aspects for their attitudes and strategies towards children. In our first observation, at the dining table, the result of a separation between play and learning might have directed the teacher's attention towards an implicit rule that children are supposed to eat, not to play, at the dining table. Even if she would have accepted and followed the children in their playful fantasies, it is not a matter of course that she would have experienced the situation as an opportunity for learning. More likely she would have seen it as an interfering obstacle to the intended purpose of the situation—to have a meal. The children's creation of meaning might not have been given the same devoted attention, and the joyful response to the children's playfulness might not have been expressed.

If we look at the second example, the young children and the farm, this situation would most probably have been regarded as a situation of learning if play and learning had been separated. The reason for this is that play in most cases is seen as something children do by themselves, without interference from teachers. In the light of this, to follow the girl in her own creation of meaning—her story about the cows—does not become something natural and important. Instead we have reason to assume that the aim would have been to bring the girl's interest and attention back to the 'actual' learning, to count and to name animals. If the teachers in both these examples had taken a different theoretical perspective as a starting point, they would have separated play and learning in a similar way to what we discussed in a previous article about care and children's learning (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). This perspective, explicit or not, relates learning mainly to specific organised situations, and affirms the child to the idea of a 'becoming' person with little or no knowledge and therefore has to be taught and moulded by the teacher.

Perhaps these speculations polarise and simplify the assumed consequences of a distinction between play and learning. Neither are we sure whether the teachers are aware that they bring these dimensions together. What becomes obvious, however, is that playful experiencing and learning are highly valued by the teachers. We have also noticed how this shows in their bodily actions. By their gestures and intonation, by being close to and directed towards the children, they show that the children's playful experiences are valuable (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Johansson, 2002, 2003). Perhaps the teachers' way of acting is 'situated within the body', without being expressed in words.

It could also be a conscious strategy, a result from a well-considered perspective of children and knowledge. Which of these approaches is used is, of course, of interest. In a conscious strategy, that values playfulness in the learning process and learning in play, these aspects are not involved randomly but in all different contexts in the everyday practice of preschool.

Play, as a phenomenon, is a conception of modern times. In the period of modernity an interest in preschool, developmental psychology and the time of childhood itself came into existence (James *et al.*, 1998). The interest in children has increased concurrently with the fact that children have also become subjected to the commercialism (Pramling Samuelsson, 1999). In other words, the interest in children's play is based upon, on the one hand, the fact that childhood today is seen as something in itself, which means that we have to find distinctive features in children's lives, which separate the time of childhood from other periods in life. Here play is a significant factor (Socialstyrelsen, 1987, 1990). On the other hand, the interest in children's play has grown because of the fact that children of today constitute a large group of consumers. There are both psychological and economic interests involved, in other words, different dimensions related to welfare (cf. Kjørholt, 2001).

We have drawn attention to the fact that play constitutes a central aspect in the children's world, and is something that is protected and defended by the preschool. Play has had a more or less prominent position within different preschool programs and theories during the twentieth century, and lately play has started to develop a position within school practice as well. Play has almost become a symbol for 'a happy childhood' and 'the natural child' (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, forthcoming). Astonishingly, play is not mentioned at all in the American research summary *Eager to Learn* (National Research Council, 2001), which is compiled by the most prominent American researchers within the field of preschool pedagogy.

Then, how is it that play is both praised and neglected? One important factor is probably the discrepancy there has been and still is within the theories when it comes to play and learning. Perhaps learning, in practice, is given a greater distinction than play, even though preschool teachers often advocate play as being the most important feature in children's development (Sandberg & Pramling Samuelsson, forthcoming).

We think that we probably have to find alternative ways of looking at play and learning, if these two aspects are going to be a part of future preschool and school practices. This is also what we have tried to illustrate and argue for, in the light of these concrete everyday situations of interplay that we have analysed.

Play and learning are dimensions that stimulate each other and could be seen as an indivisible entirety, which is a part of children's experiencing, and which helps them create an understanding of their surrounding world in a life-long process. Furthermore, we think that mimesis—the dramatically, bodily creative—and mythos—the narrative—are formed in play, but could just as well be aspects of the learning process (cf. Hangaard Rasmussen, 2002). In that case, facts and the naming and creation of meaning, as well as experiences of joy as 'as if' become interwoven parts in an overall perspective. It feels important to underline that the teachers way of acting must be built upon a respect for children's play world, and on a competence to understand

when and in what way teachers can act in order to give these dimensions a chance to interact. When this is attained, preschool could be said to stand for what we today call ‘a joyful learning’

Acknowledgement

This article is written with financial support from the National Agency for Education.

Notes

1. The aim was to map out and illustrate the quality of preschool education for young children (Johansson, 2003).
2. We are using the word ‘teacher’ for all staff working in preschool, irrespective of their profession.

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