

## **Children's Negotiation Tactics and Socio-Emotional Self-Regulation in Child-Led Play Experiences: The Influence of the Preschool Pedagogic Culture**

Lorna Arnott<sup>a\*</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>School of Education, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland*

\*Lorna Arnott, University of Strathclyde, Lord Hope Building, Room 206, 141 St James Road, Glasgow, G4 0LT,

[Tel: 0141 444 8109](tel:01414448109),

Email: [lorna.arnott@strath.ac.uk](mailto:lorna.arnott@strath.ac.uk).

**Bio:** Lorna Arnott is a Lecturer at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland. She is convenor of the European Early Childhood Educational Research Association Digital Childhoods SIG. She is the editor of Arnott, L (2017) *Digital Technologies and Learning in the Early Years*, London. SAGE. Her work focuses on young children's play experiences in early childhood, with a special interest in children's technology use, creative and social play. She also has a keen interest in consultation methodologies for young children.

# **Children's Negotiation Tactics and Socio-Emotional Self-Regulation in Child-Led Play Experiences: The Influence of the Preschool Pedagogic Culture**

Abstract: Early Childhood Education (ECE) typically positions the child at the centre of their own learning, with a high degree of child-initiated and child-led experiences. As such, ECE is often characterised by 'free play' during which children are provided with opportunities to manage and negotiate their socio-emotional interactions. This process of self-regulation is carefully moulded by a complex preschool Pedagogic Culture. Drawing on data from two projects that investigated children's social and creative play through exploratory qualitative observations, interviews and child-centred play-based methodologies, this article describes how children interpret cues in formal ECE settings to determine how they manage and regulate their play experiences and socio-emotional interactions. Findings demonstrate that children interpreted four elements of the Pedagogic Culture: Child-Centred Pedagogies, Structural Hierarchies, Rules and Regulations; and Agency and Power. Children manoeuvred these elements of the Pedagogic Culture to shape their negotiation tactics and socio-emotional self-regulation.

Keywords: Socio-emotional; self-regulation; Pedagogic Culture, child-centred play, negotiation.

## **Introduction**

Child-centred play experiences, children's agency & autonomy as well as socio-emotional development, form a triad of fundamental pedagogic principles in early child development and care. In Scotland we see these experiences foregrounded through national strategies, such as Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) (Government, 2012), and internationally through approaches such as Te whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017). Yet, despite their significance, there are very few contemporary empirical and theoretical conceptualisations, which demonstrate how these three

fundamental elements of children's learning knit together in practice. The literature bases present segregated discussion of each theme in isolation.

Work on *child-centred, child-initiated and child-led play* is available (Fisher, 2013; Wood, 2014) spanning back to pioneers in Early Childhood Education such as Susan Isaacs and Maria Montessori. This has resulted in significant insight around the extent to which the environment, both social and physical, influence and direct child-centred play experiences. This is translated into practice through works such as the Reggio Emilia Approach (Valentine, 1999) and is characterised by children's and adults' positions within the culture. Contemporary perspectives of 'child' (Wright, 2014) coupled with theorisation of 'childhood' (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998) have resulted in well-established arguments for children's *power & autonomy* in their own learning experiences. Increasingly these perspectives have been married with the Rights Based Agenda in Education, stemming from the UNCRC (1989) to provide opportunities for children to learn democratic principles. Underpinning this is an agenda focused on children's empowerment, sense of self and negotiation techniques. Such empowerment of children is informed by the long-stemmed interest in children's *socio-emotional development* and social competence, spanning several disciplines from infant mother attachment and communication in Neuroscience (Trevarthen and Delafield-Butt, 2015), socio-emotional competence in Developmental and Social Psychology (Löfdahl and Hägglund, 2006) to peer interactions and behaviours in Education (Broadhead, 2001; Parten, 1932).

Discretely these concepts have considerable relevance to Early Childhood Practice. Yet, from an interpretivist perspective (Corsaro, 2005), children's lives and learning experiences cannot be compartmentalised. The dynamic interlinking of these elements constitute a preschool Pedagogic Culture that is likely to shape, and be shaped,

by children's social play. As such, it is necessary to begin to understand the interplay between these elements of Early Childhood Education. This paper begins this discussion by reflecting on how the elements of the Pedagogic Culture contribute to, and are transformed by, children's negotiation tactics and their socio-emotional self-regulation.

### ***Child-Centred Pedagogy, Children's Agency and Autonomy***

“Creating and sustaining playful learning requires a facilitative pedagogical climate and a clear understanding of the potential young children have to take control of their play, to resolve their difficulties and to intellectually engage within a community of learners”. (Broadhead, 2009, p. 115)

This suggests, that a fundamental element of Early Childhood Education is for children to engage in peer cultures; ‘a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers’ (Corsaro and Eder, 1990, p. 197). These cultures provide a degree of familiarity and security, which set the scene for development and articulation of personal identities and offer the emotional support of membership in a common group (Corsaro, 2005).

This culture is ‘endowed’ with meaning and provides a space for children to grow within the comfort of ‘everyday cultural routines’. As children assume membership of peer cultures, they manoeuvre the context by drawing on shared knowledge and underlying themes to support their play (Corsaro and Eder, 1990). In doing so they ‘exercise agency in a *mediating* fashion, enabling them...[to] challenge and transform the situational contexts of action themselves’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998 p994). This element of peer culture, I will argue, is also present when children form membership of the Pedagogic Culture and draw on the underlying child-centred pedagogy, which helps children realise their agency and autonomy to transform the

context, and manoeuvre the situation through their negotiation tactics and socio-emotional self-regulation.

Understanding children's peer cultures within the Pedagogic Culture is important because it is within these structures that opportunities for negotiation and socio-emotional self-regulation arise. Corsaro and Eder (1990) articulate how children's peer cultures are characterised by children's attempts to gain and share control. Thus, sharing and friendship; control and autonomy; and conflict and social differentiation are central. Data presented in this paper will offer examples of how children negotiate child-centred play and their socio-emotional self-regulation. Of paramount interest is the discussion of control and autonomy and 'secondary adjustments', where recognition is given to children's attempts to use 'innovative routines and practices which indirectly challenge and circumvent adult authority' (Corsaro and Eder, 1990, p. 204).

Corsaro's discussion of conflict is particularly useful because he articulates the movement away from seeing conflict as negative behaviour towards understanding that conflict is an opportunity for language development, interpersonal and social-organisation skills. This the case with learning about democracy where conflict and resistance are opportunities to develop democratic skills and become responsible citizens to stand up to social injustice. (Johansson and Emilson, 2016). This perspective recognises conflict negotiation as a learning moment and Broadhead (2009) suggests that children are capable of autonomously negotiating conflict. For this paper, I frame the notion of conflict resolution through observations of children's negotiation tactics and socio-emotional self-regulation.

### ***Socio-Emotional Self-regulation***

This paper is concerned with children's observable behaviours that help

negotiate play experiences and give an indication of socio-emotional self-regulation, defined as:

“ability to adapt (i.e. lability and flexibility) and respond to various situations appropriately, and included the capacity to control one’s emotions in order to (Florez, 2011) engage effectively with one’s environment.” (Séguin and MacDonald, 2016, p. 2).

The significance of self-regulation is that children’s ability to manage emotions and behaviours is often linked to higher academic success in later life, better friendships and the ability to engage in pro-social behaviours (Florez, 2011; Séguin and MacDonald, 2016; Skibbe, Connor, Morrison, & Jewkes, 2011). As such, it has been suggested that self-regulation is a key indicator for social competence (Ashiabi, 2000).

From a pedagogic perspective, children’s social competence and socio-emotional self-regulation are important because children’s earliest learning experiences are shaped by their interactions (Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Siraj-Blatchford, J. 2006). We also know that children are supported in the development of such self-regulation through scaffolding (Florez, 2011) and through teaching inhibitory control (Skibbe, et al., 2011). As such it seems important to understand the role of the preschool context in shaping children’s negotiation and self-regulation approaches. This is because children need to interpret information from the environment and apply this information to regulate thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Florez, 2011). Social interactions, which comprise of negotiation and socio-emotional self-regulation, encompass norms, roles, language and non-verbal behaviour (Radley, 1996) which I will argue are inferred from the Pedagogic Culture.

## **Linking to preschool structures, socialisation, behavioural contexts**

There is a wealth of long established literature that suggests that the preschool environments, the physical milieu or the ecology of the playroom influence children's behaviours (Driscoll and Carter, 2004; Petrakos and Howe, 1996; Smith and Connolly, 1980; Updegraff and Herbst, 1933). Furthermore, Bang (2009) indicates that a sole focus on the functional or physical environment is insufficient to understand how children's interactions and behaviours manifest. Instead, the environment must be explored in conjunction with the social space.

The social environment can be understood in terms of what Barker (1968) called the 'behaviour setting'; a 'small scale social systems with standing patterns of behavior [sic] restricted by temporal and spatial boundaries (Brown et al 2007). Under this perspective "an individual entering a behaviour setting will experience 'pressures' to act in a manner consistent with the perceived character of the setting, which contributes to maintaining a particular behaviour-milieu" (p31). Children's lives are rule-bound (Alcock, 2007) and one prominent feature of the preschool setting are the rules and regulations that govern behaviour. Analysing the way children interpret and manoeuvre the structural element of the playroom is important to understanding social interactions, not least because rules can be described as "the cultural resources to which members orient in order to make sense of their social worlds" (Cobb-Moore, Danby, & Farrell, 2009, p. 1478). For this paper, this exploration of the preschool context comes from my conceptualisation of the Pedagogic Culture.

## **Framing the Paper: The Pedagogic Culture**

This article explores how the preschool environment, particularly children's interpretations of the culture shapes children's negotiation tactics and socio-emotional self-regulation. I define *Pedagogic Culture* as an explicit conceptualisation, recognition

and application of the ecological elements that frame the practice around play-based learning in early childhood. I have previously drawn on principle of human ecology which seek to understand the interplay between humans and their social and physical environment (Arnott, 2016), but the analysis in this paper focuses around extending the application of ecologies into practice, through children's interpretation of pedagogy. The paper moves beyond describing the ecological elements within a context, towards understanding how ecologies are manoeuvred by agents in practice - namely the young children. For that reason, in this paper, Bernstein's (1990; 1975, 2000) Pedagogic Discourse is a useful tool to begin to explore pedagogies.

### **Theoretical Frame: Bernstein's Pedagogic Discourse**

Bernstein's (1990; 1975, 2000) work provides a useful framework to explore key ecological elements in Early Childhood Education settings; essentially the rules and regulations and pedagogic planning, which culminate to create a 'behaviour setting' (Barker, 1968). While I have discussed this concept at a macro-level - relating more specifically to the specific ecological systems (Arnott, 2016) - this paper focuses on how this structural milieu is a dynamic element of children's socio-emotional decision making, negotiation and self-regulation.

This paper is informed specifically by the elements of Bernstein's work, which focus on the pedagogic discourse, the conceptualisation of classification and framing and the visible and invisible pedagogy (1990; 1975, 2000). Brooker describes the pedagogic discourse as "the entire process of bringing about learning in a setting", while Bernstein indicates that pedagogic *practices* are the underlying rules which shape the social construction of Pedagogic Discourse. The Pedagogic Discourse is constructed of the regulative discourse (the rules of social order) and the instructional discourse (rules of discursive order). The former is concerned with the rules in place in



the preschool which govern how children behave, while the latter focuses on how children learn (Bernstein, 2000). Both the regulative and instructional discourses are part of the framing of the environment which is concerned with who holds the control over various aspects of the learning environments. Its framing can be strong or weak. When framing is strong, the teachers have control over the transmission of knowledge while when framing is weak the students have more apparent control. In line with much of Bernstein's work this notion of framing is part of a coupling, along with *classification* which explores the strength of boundaries between categories, for example between home and school or between subjects, which can either be strong or weak.

Bernstein continued to develop these concepts to describe the potential variation in the kinds of pedagogy across different settings. He argued that pedagogic practice can be described as either: visible, where framing and classification are strong; or invisible where framing and classification are weak. The former has an explicit pedagogy while the latter is rather more implicit. The more explicit the transmission of knowledge the more visible the pedagogy is likely to be. With strong regulative discourse you would therefore expect the rules of behaviour and conduct to be explicit. Bernstein suggested that the invisible pedagogy was particularly pertinent to Early Childhood Education because among other elements, it's characterised by:

- 1) implicit control of practitioners over children
- 2) teachers planning the setting but expecting the children to 'rearrange and explore'
- 3) "reduced emphasis on transmission and acquisition of skills"
- 4) the children having power over selection, structure and scale of activities, and

5) children regulating their own social relationships and movements (King, 1979).

For Bernstein the play-based nature of Early Childhood Education underpins the invisible pedagogy (Bernstein, 1975).

This framework presents a useful starting point for beginning to understand the preschool Pedagogic Culture and children's peer cultures. The ways that children interpret the (in)visible pedagogy and manoeuvre the regulative discourse contributes to their socio-emotional negotiation and self-regulation tactics, which in turn influence their child-centred play experiences and peer cultures in the nursery. As this study was concerned with understanding the connections between the social practices, context and children's socio-emotional experiences, exploring the regulative discourse provided a starting point for understanding the phenomenon.

### **Methods and Methodology**

This paper draws on projects that are broadly Contextualist in nature (Packer and Scott, 1992), yet the analysis for this paper stems more specifically from Eco-cultural Theory as a springboard to consider the circumstances that helped to shape children's negotiation tactics and socio-emotion self-regulation as embedded within the preschool culture. Eco-cultural theory (Weisner, 2002) allows for an exploration of interaction between people and the ecological-cultural context. Within this frame, the central unit of analysis is children's cultural activities, encompassing everyday routines and practices. This frame allowed me to consider the preschool setting and children's social play as inter-connected and contingent upon each other.

Commonality across the frameworks utilised in this study was drawn from the interpretivist epistemology, which sees knowledge as constructed. Approaching this study from a primarily interpretivist stance, it was possible to see structures, such as the

pedagogic discourse, as either constraining or enabling children's social emotional self-regulation. I demonstrate in the discussion of the data, how children as agentic beings are skilful at making this distinction and interpreting the Pedagogic Culture in ways that either constrain or enable their negotiation tactics and their socio-emotional self-regulation.

## **The Studies**

This paper draws on data from two studies that sought to explore children's social play and creative play, respectively. Both studies were exploratory in nature and have a common focus on documenting young children's observable actions and behaviours during their social or creative play. The data were reanalysed with three research questions in mind:

- 1) In what ways do children negotiate and self-regulate their child-centred play experiences from 3 to 5 years old?
- 2) To what extent does the Pedagogic Culture of the Early Childhood Education context shape children's ability to negotiate and self-regulated their play experiences?
- 3) How are children's power struggles and agency as part of their peer cultures instrumental in their negotiation and self-regulation approaches and in reimagining the Pedagogic Culture?

### ***Study 1: Settings and Methods***

Data were collected from two preschools in central Scotland, with both settings offering provision for 3–5year olds. Approximately 90 children were involved in the project, across the two settings. Data were collected over a nine-month period with the same cohorts of children. I visited morning or afternoon sessions spanning 3 h. A child-led

approach was adopted where children's participation in various activities was wholly dependent on individual children's desire to take part at any given time. Children drifting in and out of researcher-led games displayed a fluid process, which was typical of their early play experiences in preschool (Moyles 2014).

Data were collected via systematic observations, cluster mapping (noting down each child's location, activity and social interaction on a classroom map), researcher-led games and interviews with practitioners. Extensive details of each of the methods employed, including the volume of data collected can be found at Arnott (2013, 2016). In short, observations and cluster mapping provided data into children's engagement, interactions, actions and behaviours during their child-centred play. The researcher-led games offer two perspectives: (1) an understanding of children's perspectives about the structure of the setting; (2) unpacking how their experiences were shaped by the physical and social structure in place. The interviews with staff provided an alternative viewpoint on the structural systems in place within the environment. The data-set focused on children's social behaviours and Broadhead, Wood, & Howard (2010) Social Play Continuum was used and adapted to code children's interactions and behaviour.

### ***Study 2: Settings and Methods***

Data were collected from one preschool in central Scotland and a local science museum. Only the data from the preschool setting is pertinent to this paper. Approximately 20 children were involved in this project from the nursery. Visits to the nursery spanned four morning sessions (9.30–11.00 a.m.), and the same cohort of children was observed on multiple occasions during these visits. As with Study 1 a child-led approach was adopted. The data were collected via observations, iPad diary software and researcher-led activities (paper-based storyboards; video-booth story

telling; iPad Storyboard and Participatory Play). Fuller details of the methods and data collection techniques are available from Arnott, Grogan and Duncan (2016).

Previous analysis of this data-set focused on children's creative engagement using Robson and Rowe's (2012) Analysing Children's Creative Thinking Framework. Nevertheless, given the exploratory nature of the data and the significant focus on naturalistic observations, it was possible to re-analyse this data from the perspective of children's social engagements, interactions, actions and behaviours in line with Study 1.

### ***Common Methodological and Ethical Considerations Across Study 1 and 2***

In both studies, I advised the children that I was writing a story about their play, so that they were familiar with our purpose. The children participated voluntarily in all elements of the data collection. Thus, not all of the children conducted all researcher-led activities, and the number of observations for each child varied, depending on their interest in the play throughout our visits.

Across the studies, the data combines adults' and children's perceptions of the regulative discourse and the (in)visible pedagogies evident in the settings, against children's observed socio-emotional play practices. Ethical approval was granted from the University ethics committees. Both SERA (2005) and EECERA (2015) ethical codes of practice were utilised to guide the studies.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Findings demonstrate that children interpret and manoeuvre the Pedagogic Culture to frame their negotiation tactics and socio-emotional self-regulation techniques. In turn the children transform and reimagine the Pedagogic Culture. Children interpreted and manipulated the discourse to govern their own socio-emotional

interactions. In doing so, children's socio-emotional self-regulated play experiences involve negotiation between children and context.

### ***Components of the Pedagogic Culture***

I identified that children in these studies recognised, conceptualised and applied four elements of the Pedagogic Culture as part of their negotiation tactics and socio-emotional self-regulation: 1) the child-centred nature of children's play and their autonomy in the play experiences; 2) the rules and regulations which governed the child-centred play; 3) hierarchies inherent in the context and 4) the power structures (both adult-child and child-child) in play. Across these components of the Pedagogic Culture, children interpreted the pedagogic discourse, which was designed to direct the rules of social and discursive order (Brooker, 2002).

### ***Children Appropriating and Manoeuvring the Pedagogic Culture***

Children manipulated and played with this pedagogic discourse as a mechanism to support their negotiation tactics and socio-emotional self-regulation. This process was reciprocal in that children's manoeuvring of the Pedagogic Culture transformed the context for children and their understanding of the possibilities for child-centred play. The following section uses evidence from the data to describe the multitude of ways that children manoeuvre the Pedagogic Culture. The data will show some examples of the interplay between children's interpretations of the four elements of the Pedagogic Culture and the negotiation and socio-emotional self-regulation approaches exhibited during child-centred play.

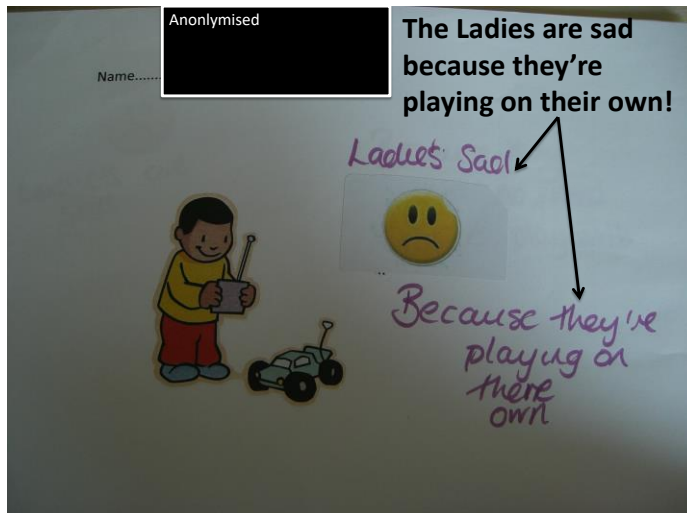
### **Component 1: Child-Centre Learning**

In line with Broadhead's (2009) findings, data indicated that the independent nature of children's play in early childhood settings provided opportunities for children

to negotiate and manage the play, which in turn largely determined the self-regulation taking place. Autonomous play, without adult intervention is typical of early childhood play experiences with practitioners supporting play by scaffolding experiences in a distal or invisible manner. Children's play was characterised by the practitioners' role as facilitator, which provided opportunities for children to openly explore the context, and the other children involved. Two elements of negotiating and socio-emotional self-regulation occurred as a result of child-centred pedagogy: 1) opportunities for developing empathy and 2) opportunities for demonstrating leadership in socio-emotional regulation.

*Empathy:* Playful negotiation and socio-emotion regulation was not solely an individualised concept whereby children managed their internal emotions, rather children's social play experiences were embedded within context. Thus, negotiating and self-regulating was not always driven by conflict resolution. In many cases, empathising and developing an awareness of other children's emotions was central to the play experience and to the cooperative nature of children's play (Broadhead, 2009). For example, various forms of helping interactions occurred where children listened to their peers' needs and offered solutions, whether that related to offering suggestions about how to complete the activity or locating resources, or offering moral or emotional support. Children demonstrated an awareness of empathy as they described images of children playing with toys. In one instance, they indicated that practitioners would be sad when they saw the image because the child was playing alone – demonstrating how the preschool structure begins to frame children's social play, see Figure 1.

*Figure 1: Empathy established from the Pedagogic Culture*



*Leadership in Negotiations:* In other instances, children used the independent and child-centred play to self-regulate the play. In these instances, the children were learning to manage the situation amicably. There were several instances where children negotiated the dynamics of the cluster unprompted by adult intervention, as in Vignette 1. A cluster here is defined as multiple children standing in close proximity and engaged as a group.

### **Vignette 1 - Negotiating the cluster management**

*Bruce appears and stands next to Dominic and says "I want a shot!". He appears distressed that he is not able to use the resource. The children are using an egg timer to manage their time but there are several children in the cluster who have been waiting longer than Bruce. Bruce looks for an egg timer, and then kneels on the side of Dominic's chair and shouts "It's a shark!". The timer finishes and Jason gets out of his seat. Kenny walks round to Bruce and says "You, look sit here" pointing at the owner's chair for which he was next in line. Bruce takes the seat and play continues with children waiting in line.*

*(Bruce, Jason, Dominic, Kenny Ages 4.25, 3.6 years and unknown)*

Leaders in the clusters required a multitude of social skills and competences. Not only, did they required empathy to understand the position and feelings of other members of the group but they also had to have a level of self-awareness, self-confidence and articulate communication strategies to negotiate their role as leader and the positions of other children within the cluster. Much of this confidence was gained from knowledge



and perceptions of the preschool context, which children maneuvered to suit their play progression.

### ***Component 2: Rules and Regulations***

Preschool rules and regulations were a main factor in shaping the development of children's negotiation and socio-emotional self-regulation. Contextual cues guided children during their play and helped to shape the social play that emerged. The most explicit of these cues was the predetermined rules of behaviour set out by practitioners; the Regulative Discourse (Bernstein, 1990). Rules and regulations were standard practice in the institutions involved in this study - such as using an egg timer to ensure fair and equal access to the resource - and helped socialise children into appropriate ways of behaving. For some the rules and regulations were the *visible pedagogy*, while for others it was a structured element of the preschool culture that could be *ignored* or *circumvented*.

*Explicit Visible Pedagogy:* Children were aware of the rules and accepted that they were a standard part of their experiences. Their understanding, or at least awareness, of the rules and regulations was evident as children recited rules back to their peers and to the researcher such as stating, "you have to line up and then one gets a turn then another one gets a turn". In another episode, children become emphatic about enforcing their *interpretation* of the rules. In Vignette 2 we see one child who is forcefully trying to justify their access to the resource by drawing on structural rules and regulations - the one child can play rule - unaware that their phrasing opens up opportunities for their peer to take the resource and still be within the rules of one child playing.

#### **Vignette 2 - Reciting rules**

*A child appears and says, "Can I play this?". The child currently in control moves the resource away. Eventually they*

say, "Only one person can play - do you want to watch?" but before he gets chance to finish his sentence child 1 steels the resource. Child 2 shouts louder "ONLY ONE PERSON CAN PLAY IT!"

(ages 3.7 and 4)

The rules provide a structure of expectations for children's behaviour (Cobb-Moore, et al., 2009). In Vignette 2, you can see anguish as the experience tests Jacob's socio-emotional regulation, forcing the child to raise his voice to negotiate enforcement of their rules. The rules provide this reference point for children to determine the appropriateness of their emotional response and to justify their actions to themselves.

*Disregarding and Circumventing:* Findings suggest that the rules do not always direct or dictate behaviours of young children. Rather, the rules provided a guide that children interpreted, manipulated and adapted depending upon the situation and the social context. Here we see evidence of Corsaro and Eder's (1990) 'Manoeuvring' in negotiating play experiences. It was children's ability to infer, adapt, and utilise rules, as appropriate, that shaped the development of children's negotiations in self-regulated child-centred play. In some instances, children's *disregard* for the rules actually resulted in more social play than may have developed under the guidance of standard preschool regulation. In one nursery, practitioners suggested only one child should use the interactive whiteboard at a time. Yet, in Vignette 3, the children were able transform a potentially solitary play situation into a social play scene by using the interactive whiteboard together.

### **Vignette 3 -Ignoring Preschool Rules**

Jasper and Glen control the smartboard simultaneously. They are playing a game where a messy cartoon character appears in a household bathroom and the children are able to control his actions so that he throws pink slime all over the bathroom walls. Glen begins to dirty the bathroom and Jasper jokes when he says "Oh Glen, look at what you've done to the bathroom!" then smiles as he looks to Glen for a response. Glen responds

with a cheer and they both laugh and giggle about the mess they have made. Both boys return to the game. "I'll do smalls, you do big" Jasper suggests to Glen and without any question they begin to play the game with Jasper controlling the lower part of the screen and Glen controlling the upper sections.

(Glen and Jasper, aged 4 and 5).

In other situations, children found a loopholes in, or approaches to *circumvent* the rules. For example, a nearby desktop computer powered the interactive whiteboard and by controlling the interactive whiteboard and the computer simultaneously as demonstrated in Figure 2, children were able to create a collaborative play experience. In this example, the children were technically not breaking any rules because only one child was physically controlling the whiteboard, yet they were able to manipulate the rules in a social manner. The nuanced manoeuvring of the Pedagogic Culture is quite subtle but resonates with Corsaro and Eder's (1990, p. 215) 'secondary adjustments' which can often are more complex (structurally and interactively) than the rules themselves".

Figure 2: Circumventing rules



The ability to circumvent rules related to the child's perceptions of the hierarchies and power structures in the culture, as described in the following two sections.

### **Component 3: Structural Hierarchies**

Hierarchies are a key feature in children's play. For example Cobb-Moore (2012) suggest at children developed hierarchies in peer cultures to manage disputes in pretend play. For this study the hierarchies were more structural, as part of the Pedagogic Culture, and contributed in two ways as children drew on: 1) the *dominant enforceable pedagogy* or 2) *ambiguous weak framing* to shape the negotiation and self-regulation strategies.

*Dominant enforceable pedagogy:* A visible pedagogy coupled with hierarchies of authority helped children frame their negotiation and socio-emotional self-regulation as they drew on the rules rigidly in order to meet their needs. Children recognised the supremacy of pre-determined regulations and they also recognised the authority structures within the preschool; i.e. visible pedagogy was the most strongly framed and classified and was therefore the dominant pedagogy in that it was easiest to enforce. In addition, it was understood that practitioners held the most authority in validating enforcement of the dominant pedagogy. Thus, if the child did not respect the egg timer or general turn-taking rules (for example by turning the egg timer over again to give themselves more time), the child attempting to negotiate access would move further up the hierarchy and call a practitioner to facilitate, as shown below in Vignette 4.

#### **Vignette 4 - Moving up the Hierarchy**

Boy 1 states to boy 4, 'I'm building a tower.' Boy 2 is trying to play with them but Boy 1 states, 'I'm just playing with Allan'. Boy 4 takes blocks out of Boy 1s hands and continues to build the structure as Boy 1 talks to Boy 2- repeating that he is not to play with them as boy 1 and 4 are playing by themselves.

Boy 2 then states he is telling on the boys for not sharing.

Practitioners were in a position to explicitly direct children's behaviours and interactions and children readily accepted these instructions. Furthermore, children

recognise when peers were not following rules and they understood that by employing the rules rigidly they could control the social play experience with the help of a practitioner and it would be unquestioned. We know that practitioner authority is considered absolute (Laupa, 1994) and children found ways to use this to their advantage. Thus, this social hierarchy was created and made explicit to children through practitioners' enforcement of rules and was embedded in the preschool culture. Children not only accepted it but also recreated and reconstructed it by drawing on practitioners' authority when they required support in their negotiations. This tactic for negotiation, demonstrates a level of socio-emotional self-regulation as children identify their growing frustration and seek support to manage their regulation before it escalates into inappropriate behaviour, which would then weaken the challenging child's position in negotiating the play experience.

*Dynamic Hierarchies:* While the hierarchies appear to be clear in the nursery, with adults holding absolute control, children were able to elevate or suppress their position in the hierarchy depending upon their socio-emotional self-regulation tactics. Children who failed to manage their emotions, who raised their voices in protest or physically attempted to take control of the play, were more likely to be challenged by adults for their behaviour. The child's position within the hierarchy is suppressed further. Irrespective of whether there had been an injustice for that child or not, their opportunity to direct the play experience or gain access to a resource became secondary to practitioners seeking to support their behaviour management rather than ensuring fair turn-taking etc.

Alternatively, children who were very confident and competent at their socio-emotional self-regulation were able to recognise when there may be an injustice, in line with the rules and regulations of the culture, and rather than allowing their emotions to

consume them they were able to draw on those elements of the visible pedagogy to help them state their case. This by proxy elevated their position in the hierarchy, relative to the other child, and allowed them to manage the situation, knowing they would have full backing from the nursery staff.

In the following example, Eva is able to elevate her hierarchical status in the play scene, as described above, in two ways. Firstly, she shows empathy for her fellow player and provides him with her phone when his is taken (creating a sense of fairness in the practitioner's view). Secondly, she draws on the visible pedagogy about turn-taking and sharing and rather than allowing her dissatisfaction to escalate emotionally, she calmly turns to practitioners for help. It appears to go unnoticed at the end of the altercation, the two original children who had been playing with the phones, still have these toys, and the Jacob is not provided with any opportunity to share the resource. Jacobs actions of snatching the phone, suppresses his hierarchical standing in the group, while Eva's apparent altruistic sharing of her own phone elevates her standing. No recognition is given to the underlying issue that no one is allowing Jacob to play.

**Vignette 5 - Children ask Practitioners to Mediate Sharing and Confrontation**

*Jeremy and Eva have mobile phones and Jacob wants to play. Jacob snatches a phone from Jeremy. Eva gives her phone to Jeremy so Jacob snatches Jeremy's phone. Jacob holds it behind his back as Eva approaches to take it back. Eva says to a practitioner "Jacob snatched the pink telephone from Jeremy so I gave Jeremy my telephone but Jacob won't give me the pink telephone"*

(Jeremy, Jacob and Eva ages unknown, 3.6 and 4.75)

This example is a clear demonstration of how power differences are likely to begin to emerge in the play. It also demonstrates that children are knowingly able to provoke particular responses from practitioners and use this technique to manoeuvre the play experience.

**Component 4: Power and Agency**

On one hand, children's agency in the play is fundamentally constrained by practitioner planning, the predetermined rules and regulations and the preschool social, emotional, physical and cultural environment that is constructed for them. Thus, the preschool is a co-educator (De Visscher and Bouverne-De Bie, 2008) and children's perceptions of the environment contribute to their behaviours and interactions. On the other hand, children in these studies were agentic beings and they were able to skilfully shift the power dynamics within their play in two ways 1) *using knowledge as power* and 2) *controlling through imaginary play*.

*Knowledge as power:* Knowledge of the environment, knowledge of play themes and knowledge of resources, generated power dynamic between children and between adults and children. Fundamentally, children were able to elevate themselves into positions of power, through knowledge of the Pedagogic Culture and ways of playing. In doing so they were able to re-create hierarchical structures, or even generate hierarchies between peer groups. Children's knowledge of the resources obtained through frequent use facilitated the development of helping interactions between peers. Children's free choice of activities, allowed specific children to frequently play with the same activities. These children became experts with the resource. Often these children offered direction about how to complete the activity by demonstrating and describing the process of the play to less knowledgeable peers, see Vignette 6.

### **Vignette 6 - Demonstrating to less knowledgeable peers**

*Siobhan and Pamela sit side-by-side using laptops. Pamela watches as Siobhan opens and closes her laptop.  
Pamela says "I look, I'll show you. Press that"  
Siobhan smiles at Pamela and watches as Pamela shows her what to do.*

*(Siobhan and Pamela, ages 4.25 and 4.6 years)*

Yet, the altruistic nature of this help was questionable as children often saw helping interactions as a mechanism to circumvent preschool turn-taking rules and as a way of maintaining access to the play. Here again we see a position where children elevate their hierarchical status from a cultural perspective and put themselves in a position of power. For the practitioner, it appears that the child is demonstrating highly social play and supporting other children. Yet, in reality, on several occasions, ‘helping’ children were directing the play by proxy, usually a highly elaborate and sophisticated technique to negotiate the child-centred play space and maintain control.

In other cases, children were able to demonstrate their power over other children through subtly assigning play roles. This was the case in the extract presented below; again the child appears, to the practitioner on looking, to be engaging in social play which is inclusive while also taking the initiative to be a leader. On closer reflection, the child is excluding the child from the play, in a way that does not challenge the regulative discourse. In the following activity the leader in the group did not want to welcome a new member, but as his attempts persisted the leader gave him a degrading role of the burglar.

“Eva is in control of a storyline in this play and is also in control of the technological resources in the role-play corner. There are eight children involved in the activity and she is inclusive with all these cluster members, always making sure that everyone has a role. Yet when Jason attempts to join the play she is very dismissive of his efforts, telling him there are too many members in the cluster already. He becomes upset and Eva recognises his disappointment. She allows him to join the cluster but tells him he is a burglar who will attempt to rob the house. She is the mother of the family and the rest of the children are family members. Jason takes on this role cautiously and then becomes upset again, as he realises his role involves him being rejected from the house again and being turned over to the police.” (Arnott, 2013, p. 106).



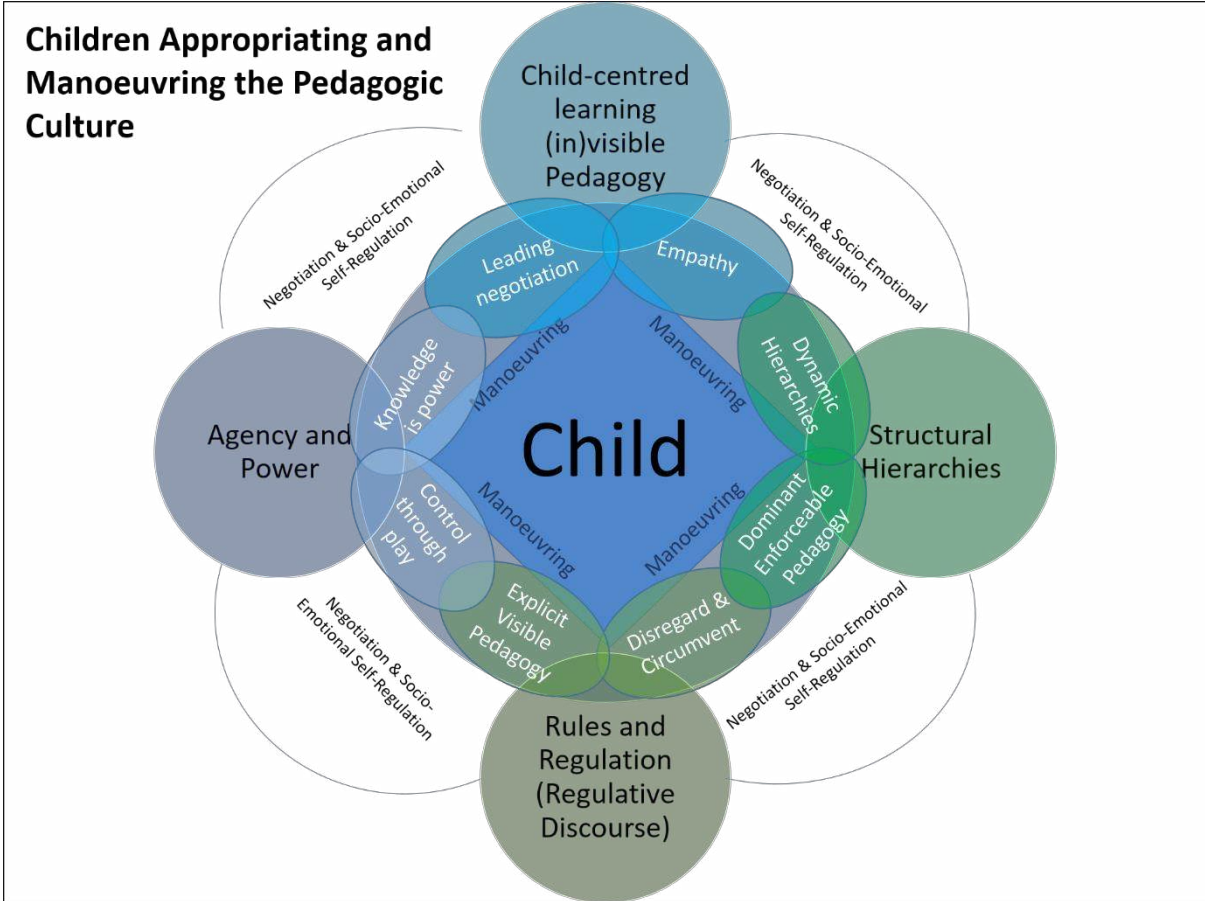
Here we see children, skilled at negotiating in play experiences and at all times maintaining control and composition of emotions while manipulating the Pedagogic Culture to shape the play.

## **Conclusions**

Evidence (or at least theories grounded in empirical data) suggests that preschools are a system of routines, rules and regulations (Alcock, 2007; Brooker, 2002), social hierarchies, and experts and novices (Plowman and Stephen, 2007) and Jordan, Cowan, & Roberts (1995) argues that the child's world is a world 'presented to them ready made by adults'. Hence, while there is some freedom for children to make decisions, their agency is somewhat limited because adults plan everything about preschool for children. It became clear that inducting children into the rules and regulations of the preschool helps to create 'strong framing' which is aimed to guide behaviour (Bernstein, 1990).

While the framing is created by adults, Alcock (2007, p. 281) argued that "children re-create their own culture meaningfully by playing flexibly with the rules that surround everyday practices". Children in this study were continually flexible with the rules and the Pedagogic Culture more broadly, by manoeuvring it to meet their needs. Understanding how children interpret the Pedagogic Culture is vital because they typically manage their own involvement in clusters. This freedom to interpret and manipulate their culture, alters the children's perceptions of what is possible from child-centred play and in turn helps them reimagine the Pedagogic Culture in an interpretivist manner. This process is summarised in the following diagram which seeks to synthesise the findings discussed in this paper.

*Figure 3: Manoeuvring the Pedagogic Culture*



From an Educational perspective, these findings are pertinent as Kennewell and Morgan (2006) suggest that implicit rules concerning interaction with others have influences on how children learn. It is suggested that “socialization is not only a matter of adaptation and internalisation, but also a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction” (Corsaro, 1993). Central to this view is the appreciation for communal activity, which in these studies was framed around child-centred play. It is here we see children’s negation tactics and socio-emotional self-regulation through joint culture creating. Providing a frame to which children may orient and discuss is vital as “routines and language activities are of crucial importance...it is through such activities that peer cultures are produced and maintained” (Corsaro and Eder, 1990, p. 217).

I describe the paradox whereby practitioners manufacture spaces for children's autonomy in the play process by initially restricting their behaviours, in the extract below:

“The system was facilitated by the ongoing development and reaffirmation of hierarchical power constructs, with adults and practitioners maintaining an authority that is absolute and unquestioned (Laupa 1994). Practitioners purposefully construct this power disparity, which contributes to children's everyday experiences, because it is through the construction of a system of mutually accepted practice, behaviours, routines and rules, that practitioners are comfortable 'affording' children freedom in their play. Thus, in order to give children agency in a world where practitioner accountability is high, practitioners first need to be confident that the children are both safe and capable of managing their own digital play experiences; they develop this confidence by instilling rules and routines.” (Arnott, 2016).

This framing of children's experiences in a distal manner, for me epitomizes the Pedagogic Culture as a key contributor within which children are negotiating and self-regulating their socio-emotional child-centred play. It represents a paradox between a pedagogy that is visible to the adult, with strong classification and framing in terms of behavioural regulation and the child-centred approach to learning that typifies the invisible pedagogy. Within this Pedagogic Culture, children interpret cues from the context and play with boundaries as part of their own negotiation and socio-emotional self-regulation techniques. We begin to see child-centred play experiences, which encompass the freedom to negotiate and self-regulate, representing a form of interpretive reproduction (Corsaro, 2005) where children have agency in the production and participation of their unique peer culture, which in turn continually changes the wider Pedagogic Culture.

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