

Also withdrawn children find agency in kindergarten

This article describes a peculiar situation that occurred in an ongoing research. In the research I try to get a grasp of children as agents of their orientation, and more specifically, how children's mental images of the situations relate to their agency and environmental change. Agency means in this context that a child has influence on the course of events (see James & Prout 1997, 4-5). The other question concerning agency is if children see agency in the situation and what is the relationship of children's perception and their actions. Some situations were presented for the children and the amount of agency was measured from the number of children's answers with agency. In some situations the children saw more agency than in other situations. This article concentrates on a situation in which children saw generally less agency, but when the relations between variables were checked, it were the withdrawn and timid children who saw most agency in that situation.

Because in this research not only the children's agentic behavior was studied, but also the children's agentic schemas' influence was studied, it adds a new phenomenon to the equilibrium process. Both closed and open schemas may or may not change the environment. In fact, Piaget did not consider the possibility of schemas changing the environment. This makes up the theoretical framework of this research, which resembles Piagetian ideas of adaptation (see Piaget 1970), but adds the Hegelian tradition to the theoretical model. In the Hegelian tradition the process transcends both of the interacting phenomenon. Engels describes: "The great basic idea that the world is not to be viewed as a complex of fully fashioned objects, no less than the images of them inside our heads (our concepts), are undergoing incessant changes" (see Vygotsky, "*Mind in society* 1978).

Conducting research

For this research 73 children, aged 3-7 years, from four randomly selected kindergartens in Helsinki, were interviewed. The children were asked fifteen different questions which are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 The interview questions

1. Let's think that somebody else has the toy you want. What do you do?
2. What do you do when you are playing and somebody comes to disturb you and interrupts your play?
3. Let's think that you are playing with someone and your friend wants to change play. What do you do?
4. What if a friend will not play with you? What do you do?
5. Let's think about a situation where somebody comes to tease you. What do you do?
6. When there comes a situation that teacher comes to stop your play, what do you do then?
7. Let's think that you are playing with a friend and you would like to change play, but your friend does not. What do you do?
8. What if in kindergarten teacher will not play with you. What do you do?
9. Let's think that you are playing a game with somebody and the other does not follow the rules. What do you do then?
10. What if you are doing an important work and somebody comes to disturb you, what do you do then?
11. Think of a situation that your work is ruined and you fail. What do you do then?
12. What if somebody takes your toy?
13. Think that in kindergarten a teacher gets annoyed at you and scolds you. What do you do then?
14. From a kindergarten you may not go home alone in the middle of the day, but you would like to go home already. What do you do then?
15. What if you will be left alone among others in the kindergarten. What do you do?

The answers were grouped in to three categories: 1) the child does not change the condition of the given context, or 2) the child changes the condition, or the answer was 3) unclear or indecisive. For the second category (child changes the condition for the given situation) children's actions were observed in a normal kindergarten environment. The systematic sampling was used and the children were observed in two-minute intervals each a total of 1678 times. The observation took place always between 8 a.m. and 12 p.m. The third way of getting information was teachers' and parents' evaluations of children's actions: did the children change themselves in the changing situation or did they change their situations. The evaluation was done with a questionnaire in which the child's relation to the changing situation was evaluated from one to six on the Likert scale.

Results

Children's answers were separated in two categories. Those answers that expressed agency, and those that did not. In Table 2 are listed the different situations and the number of children's answers that had an element of agency in them.

Table 2. The number of answers expressing agency in different situations

Situation presented to the child	Number of answers with agency
Teacher will not play with you	4
Teacher comes to stop your play	6
You want to change play but your friend does not	13
Teacher gets annoyed at you	13
Somebody else is having the toy you want	18
You want to go home already	19
Your friend wants to change play	25
The other does not follow the rules	35
You fail	38
Your friend will not play with you	39
You are left alone in the kindergarten	44
Somebody comes to disturb your play	45
Somebody comes to disturb your work	45
Somebody takes your toy	49
Somebody comes to tease you	54

The smallest number of agentive strategies was found to be in the situation: 'teacher will not play with you'. Altogether 62 children disclosed a strategy that did not change the given condition 'teacher will not play with you'. Most often (n=40) the children say that they play with a friend instead. For example, children said:

*'I play with somebody else',
'I play with a child',
'I go and find somebody else',
'then I don't play with her',
'I play with a friend' etc.*

The second popular strategy was that the child played alone (n=11). For example

*'I play alone again',
'then I play puzzle',
'I play with legos',
'I take sand in my hand, I do nothing else'*

The third largest group (n=8) consisted of those children, whose answers could not be categorized, or the children said that they do not know what to do. Only four children displayed a strategy that was categorized as changing the given condition. They were:

*'Then I ask or I play alone',
'Some time in Christmas, I interrupt her when she talks with another teacher',
'I tell her can you play with me',
'She will play with me'.*

It seems that children very often consider that it is useless to try and get the teacher to play with them, if the teacher does not want to. Two-thirds of the children just turn to other children, if the teacher will not play with them. They may even prefer to play with other children. Many also start to play alone. Only four children feel that they were capable of changing that condition. It seems to be no easy task to change the teacher's mind when she does not play with the child. The situation where the teacher comes to stop a child's play has the second smallest number of change strategies. The situation where the teacher gets annoyed at the child has the fourth smallest number of change strategies. It seems that in kindergarten situations, where the teacher is the other actor, children often feel that they will not change the teacher's way of behaving.

What are those children like who see teacher's behavior as changeable? To find this out, a Mann-Whitney test was conducted for the two groups of children, children whose strategy did not change the given the condition (n=62) and those four children whose answers were categorized as change strategies (see above). The result was surprising and can be seen in Table 2 below:

Table 2 Adaptive and change strategy group-differences in the ‘teacher does not play with you’ situation

Variable	Adaptive group mean	Change strategy group mean
(Teacher evaluation 1-5): the child withdraws and seems not to contact others. (p=0.016)	2.00	3.75
(Teachers evaluation 1-5): the child defines also what others do, child uses his/her influence on others. (p=.029)	3.31	1.50
(Teacher evaluation 1-5): Child is in the center of the developing action, child changes situations together with others. (p=.008)	3.35	1.50
(Teacher evaluation 1-5): The child is socially bold. Fright does not restrict his/her actions. (p=.020)	3.71	1.75
The average of the nearest contact’s action categorized as ‘orientation’. (p=.044)	6.07%	2.44%
The average of the nearest contact’s influence on others as evaluated by teachers. (p=.014)	3.43	2.07
The average of the nearest contact’s attention to the ‘whole situation. (p=.044)	48.5%	35.5%

There are several striking things in the Table above. First the teachers seem to recognize these children. No other question had so many statistically significant connections with the teachers’ evaluations. Because the situation deals with teachers and the child, it is easy to understand that teachers’ evaluations of the children’s actions match. The teachers make their evaluations according to their experiences with the children. In this situation the teachers have found children with change strategies different from the others.

Another striking thing is that children who see that they may change teachers behavior (make them play with him/her) are evaluated as not being strong and bold. The teachers evaluate these children as withdrawing and as not contacting others. The child does not use his/her influence on others and fear restricts his/her actions more. Still the children feel they can make teachers play with them! There may be at least two explanations for this. The teachers treat these four children differently and try to help them to come out of their shells. The other reason might be that the withdrawn, timid and non-participating manner makes it impossible for them to turn to friends with whom they could play.

The third striking thing is these children’s nearest contact’s qualities. These children are together with children who ‘orientate (wander around)’ less. The nearest contacts are also more often not ‘dominating’ and they pay less attention to the dynamic ‘whole situation’. Clearly these children tend focus their attention towards children who seem to be like themselves.

The following figure helps us to sort out the relationship between these children’s actions and their views. The percentages (and the number of occurrences) of different actions are those of children who think they might make the teacher play with them. The higher the column, the larger the percentage of these children (compared to other children) are found doing the specified action of all observed action.

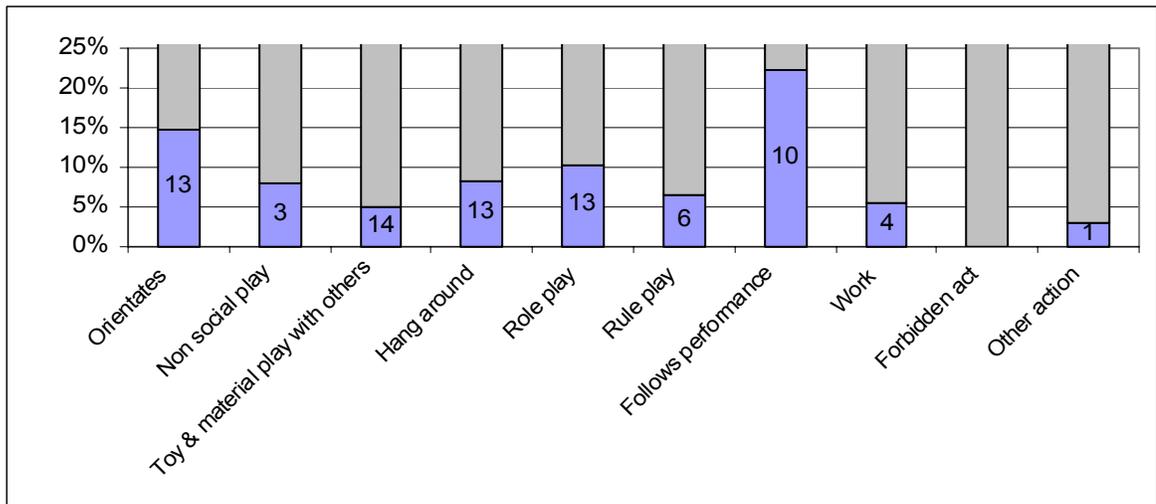


Figure 1 The percentage of different actions of those children who think they may make the teacher play with them

The children who think they may make the teacher play with them act differently in the kindergarten than other children. The difference between the categories is statistically significant ($df=9$, $F=2.770$, $p=.003$). In the post hoc test (Tukey) the difference of those children who see themselves as altering the teacher’s behavior concentrates on the category ‘Follows performance’. The difference between ‘Following performance’ and other categories in the post hoc test was significant in ‘Toy & material play with others’ ($p=.002$), ‘Hang around with others’ ($p=.002$), ‘Work’ ($p=.026$) and ‘Rule play’ ($p=.037$).

Children who think they may make the teacher play with them is more often, e.g., listening to a book or watching a video rather than playing with toys with their friends. These children are more often following a performance than working, rule playing, hanging around with friends or playing with materials among other children. The difference is between a passive and independent action. Children seem to orientate towards situations where they are on the receiving end in the process.

Withdrawn children orientate more towards peers who participate in kindergarten action less than others. This reinforces the children's exclusive role among peers. These children encounter a more passive kindergarten, when looked upon from the general kindergarten perspective. But as we have seen, children can exhibit unexpected agency in their own subcultures. It can be that the very reason why withdrawn children orientate towards like-minded peers is their possibility for agentive and familiar ways to relate towards others. When children relate to passive peers, they may exert more agency in the conditions of those particular situations.

When children follow a performance, no special action is demanded. This gives room for personal interpretation towards the subject. Following a performance may appear as being more passive than it actually is, if we concentrate only on the social dynamics of the interaction. But as a performance demands no action from a spectator, it in fact can give more possibilities to develop own interpretations and more independent flow of imagination and thought concerning the subject. It may be that children who need a lot of imaginative freedom, or whose line of thought differs from others, in fact find their freedom in books and presentations. Children who are agentive socially, must keep their thoughts in line with others, otherwise they lose contact or get in to a conflict. Social passiveness may be a consequence of imaginative activeness or difference.

The results highlight the flexible nature of action in the kindergarten action. Even withdrawing and socially timid children find situations where they can be participants in the development of the social interactions. Socially active children do not have the same opportunity, do not see the opportunity, or they do not seek out the same opportunity as withdrawn children. In studying children's orientation we are hot on the heels of children's personal development. Different orientation means differences in agency, which again means differences in developmental possibilities and interests.

References

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