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A funds of knowledge approach to examining play interests: listening to children's and parents' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Children's interests are widely recognised as pivotal to meaningful learning and play in the early years. However, less is known about how children's diverse interests may contribute to relationships and interactions within peer cultures. This article builds upon previous studies to argue that participation in sociocultural activity generates interests informed by funds of knowledge that children reconstruct in their play. It reports findings from an interpretive study that used filmed footage of children's play as a provocation to explore the perspectives of children, parents and teachers. The article presents original insights regarding some ways in which mutually constituted funds of knowledge afford opportunities for children to co-construct meaning. The findings also indicate that interests arising from diverse funds of knowledge may contribute to the interplay of power, agency and status within peer cultures. This raises some issues regarding how matters of inclusion and exclusion are understood and responded to within early years settings. The article recommends that teachers and researchers engage critically with children's individual and collective funds of knowledge in order to better understand the complexities of play cultures.

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Introduction

The rhetoric of building a curriculum upon children's play choices and interests is well established within early childhood education (Wood 2014a) and arises from a proposition that early learning experiences should have relevance and meaning for children (Carr et al. 2010). Understandings of what constitutes 'interest' are not universal, but emerge from socially and historically constructed perspectives of young children, learning and pedagogy. However, debates about the ontology of children's interests have arguably been neglected (Birbili and Tsitouridou 2008; Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan 2011), leading to ambiguous and under-theorised notions of what is meant by children's play interests.

Dominant understandings of play within early childhood education are embedded within a theoretical framework of developmental psychology, which places emphasis upon 'resource rich-environments and ample opportunities for children to explore as

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they choose' (Stephen 2010, 20). The free availability of resources and materials can offer important affordances for children to explore their diverse interests and make meaning as they play (Broadhead and Burt 2012). However, pedagogical practices informed by developmental psychology have arguably led to limited interpretations of children's interests and to an underestimation of the extent to which such interests are situated within the sociocultural practices of the home, classroom and community (Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan 2011; Hedges 2015). Furthermore, the mantra of 'learning through play' that is widely accepted in Western early childhood education has sometimes created a romanticised notion of the choices and interests that children explore in their play (Grieshaber and McArdle 2010). This article makes a significant contribution to shifting the discourse of play to incorporate critical understandings of children's interests and how they relate to the manifestation of power and inequality within the classrooms and peer cultures of early childhood (Sutton-Smith 1997; Wood 2014a).

This paper reports a small-scale, interpretive study of play in an English reception class (Chesworth 2015). The study aimed to understand play through the perspectives of children, parents and teachers and was informed by the conviction that 'in order to understand children we must be cognisant of the social, cultural and historical practices in which they live and learn' (Hedegaard et al. 2008, 1). Three episodes of sociodramatic play are presented to illustrate how children's interests can be theorised as a desire to connect with and reconstruct meaning from the sociocultural activities, values and practices of the communities to which they belong. The paper draws and builds upon the work of Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan (2011), applying 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al. 1992) as a theoretical framework to analyse and understand young children's play interests through a sociocultural lens. The discussion considers how children drew upon mutually constituted funds of knowledge to co-construct meaning in their play. Furthermore, this paper argues that children's access to funds of knowledge may influence the distribution of power, agency and choice within classroom peer cultures.

Play, curriculum and children's interests: the English context

The English curriculum for children from birth to five, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), positions play and exploration as key characteristics of effective learning (DfE 2014, 9). However, whilst the EYFS alludes to a play-based curriculum, it is located within an increasingly utilitarian ideology, where early childhood is conceptualised as a site of preparation for formal education (Moss 2007, 2013). This has led to a preoccupation with what play can 'do' for children (Rogers 2011) and the 'colonisation' of children's play (Rogers and Evans 2007) as a vehicle for delivering predetermined and universally applied learning outcomes. Such a conceptualisation of play may limit the possibilities that play affords for children to draw upon their interests, to negotiate ideas and to co-construct meaning (Broadhead and Burt 2012). There are tensions associated with attempts to align children's interests with nationally imposed learning goals and with the consequent 'taming of play' (Wood 2014b, 145) to address educational priorities.

The curriculum guidance for the EYFS, Development Matters, states that teachers should observe children 'showing particular interests', 'make sure resources are relevant to children's interests' and 'support children's interests over time' (Early Education 2012, 6–7). However, the document offers no illumination upon what may constitute

such interests, thus supporting Birbili and Tsitouridou's (2008) proposition that a curriculum informed by 'children's interests' has become a taken-for-granted, under-theorised practice of early childhood education.

What constitutes 'interest'?

Interpretations of children's interests have tended to place emphasis upon children's individual engagement with materials or activities within the play environment (Carr 2008). Hedges (2011, 187) suggests that this perspective 'invites a low-level interpretation' of what constitutes children's interests. Efforts to bring greater theoretical rigour to understanding and responding to children's interests have emerged from Piagetian thinking regarding schemas, defined as 'the mental structures into which we organise the knowledge we hold about the world' (Anning and Edwards 2006, 69). Schemas have been used as a lens to understand children's interests in relation to the repeated patterns of behaviour that may be exhibited in play as children make connections in their experiences and construct understanding (Athey 2007; Nutbrown 2011). However, Piagetian interpretations do not illuminate the ways in which interests may arise from children's participation in everyday experiences at home and at school. According to Rogoff (2003), children's learning is not an individualised, internal process; rather, knowledge is co-constructed through observing and participating in socially and culturally defined practices. Participation does not always require active engagement in face-to-face activity, and even solo activity is mediated by cultural goals and values (Rogoff 1990). Indeed, Shotter (1993) proposes that the individual is never entirely separate from cultural activity: reciprocal relationships underpin human existence and are the means by which meanings are constructed and reconstructed. Therefore, children's engagement in the everyday social and cultural practices of the home, school and community becomes a key aspect of understanding and responding to their interests (Hedges 2015).

The notion of 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al. 1992; González et al. 2005) offers an alternative mode to individual, Piagetian notions for understanding children's interests within the context of their participation in the activities of their homes, classrooms and communities. Informed by sociocultural perspectives of learning, the concept of funds of knowledge acknowledges the richness of experiences associated with children's active participation in multi-generational household and/or community activities (González et al. 2005). Moll et al. propose that such activities contain 'ample cultural and cognitive resources' (1992, 134) and urge teachers to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of the whole child through getting to know her/his family, in order to facilitate transfer of knowledge between home and school contexts. Riojas-Cortez's (2001) study of bilingual preschool children's sociodramatic play offers insights into how funds of knowledge can be applied in an early years context to implement a culturally responsive curriculum informed by children's interests and capabilities. Hedges (2010, 2011, 2015) and her colleagues (Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan 2011) offer more substantial contributions to understanding how funds of knowledge can be utilised to understand children's interests in relation to social and cultural practices.

Like Moje et al. (2004), this paper understands funds of knowledge to be both the 'sources of' and 'areas of' knowledge (Hogg 2011, 669) that inform children's interests. Whilst recognising the potential ambiguity associated with this broad definition (Hogg 2011), this

interpretation is in line with participatory theories of early learning (Hedges 2015), in which process and content are conceptualised as mutually constituted. The examples of play that follow illustrate the breadth in sources of funds of knowledge, which extend beyond children's participation in household activities to include those emerging from engagement with popular culture (Andrews and Yee 2006; Hedges 2011) and participation in classroom and school cultures (Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan 2011).

Thus, the research reported in this paper builds on previous applications of funds of knowledge to further engage with the proposition that children's interests arise from everyday engagement in family, classroom and community activities. In particular, the paper focuses upon how shared funds of knowledge afford possibilities for children to collaborate in their play to co-construct meaning. Conversely, whilst the concept of funds of knowledge is intended to counteract deficit models of family and community knowledge, this paper provides original interpretations of how differing access to funds of knowledge may offer insights into matters of inclusion, exclusion and status within children's play.

The status of children's interests

Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) propose that early childhood teachers may speak a rhetoric of child-centred practice, yet simultaneously adopt positions of power to ban or restrict certain play interests and choices. Likewise, Lambirth and Goouch (2006) refer to the invisible pedagogies of the early years classroom in which implicit control is achieved through the seeming availability of free choice for children to explore their interests through play; playful activity that is in reality manipulated by adult-imposed restrictions in terms of what, where and how play is allowed to take place. For example, play interests that explore macabre themes (Grieshaber and McArdle 2010) or that subvert social norms (Henricks 2009) may be discouraged in classroom contexts. In addition, Jarvis's (2007) analysis of rough and tumble play found that it was often defined by teachers as a low-level activity that was frequently banned or restricted in classrooms, whilst Holland (2003) has problematised the common practice of suppressing children's interests in weapons and play fighting.

Furthermore, young children's peer cultures (Corsaro 2000) exist as classroom subcultures that exert further influences upon interests and how they are reconstructed in play. Löfdahl (2006) proposes that the social structures of peer cultures create high- and low-status positions that impact upon the negotiation of play roles and act as devices to control children's inclusion or exclusion in play. Thus, it is proposed that children's play choices are not always freely made, but occur within the context of relational power differentials that place some children at an advantage over others (Blaise and Ryan 2012; Wood 2014a). This serves to compound the somewhat uneven playing field upon which children are able to demonstrate agency and make meaning of their interests.

Therefore, there is a need to interrogate interpretations of young children's interests through a critical lens. This may inform a deeper understanding of how interests are manifested within the social hierarchies that operate in classrooms between adults and children, and between children in peer cultures.

Methodology and methods

This paper reports on selected data from a larger study that aimed to understand play through the insider perspectives of children, their parents and teachers (Chesworth

2015). This reflects the study's location within sociocultural theory and its recognition that children's interests arise through participation in the everyday practices of the home and the classroom. The discussion will draw upon three episodes of play to illuminate the research question:

In what ways do insider perspectives contribute to understandings of how children's play interests are mediated by their participation in the interconnected contexts of the classroom, the home and the wider community?

Based in an English reception class, the study focused upon the play of five key children and their peers, all aged 4–5 years. Over a period of eight months, I spent three hours a week filming episodes of freely chosen play and using the filmed material as a provocation for listening to the perspectives of children and their parents, siblings and teachers. This method draws upon the seminal studies of Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1989; 2009) that used filmed material of everyday preschool events to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers, an approach that Tobin (2009, 261) has described as 'video-cued multivocal ethnography'. Hence, at the heart of this study was a rigorous research design that enabled the 'telling and re-telling of the same event from different perspectives' (Tobin, Wu, and Davidson 1989, 4). The data reported in this paper were generated from children's, parents' and teachers' responses to viewing the filmed recordings of play. The episodes selected for viewing were chosen by the children, as discussed later in the paper. I viewed the selected episodes with the focus on children and their chosen peers during the school day and with children and their parents during evening visits to family homes. I also watched the same recordings with the class teachers at the end of the school day. The data includes the unstructured conversations, comments and non-verbal responses that occurred when the children, parents and teachers watched the filmed play episodes. In total, the data comprises seventy transcribed responses, representing 21 hours of video-cued engagement with children, families and teachers.

Given that the intention of the filmed material was to elicit participants' perspectives, it was important that it provided as accurate a documentation of the children's play as possible. However, prior knowledge and experience will always influence a researcher's gaze (Siraj-Blatchford 2010) and real-world research can never be neutral, objective or value-free. My background as an early years teacher and my agenda for the study will have influenced the filming process, albeit in subtle ways, and visual imagery is inevitably a social construction (Thomson 2008). For example, the positioning of the camera in relation to the players and the process of zooming in on certain actions represent a subjective way of viewing the play that meant some level of analysis had already taken place (Plowman and Stephen 2008) before the participants viewed the recorded materials. This required a self-aware, reflexive approach that involved ongoing consideration of the impact that both my presence and the recording process had upon the study and upon the participants. Reflexivity also became an ethical practice, whereby use of the camera was mindful of how children and their play were represented in the recordings.

Located within a theoretical framework that understands young children as competent, active agents (Christensen and James 2008), the study adopted an epistemology that recognises children's perspectives as key to understanding aspects of their own lives (Pascal and Bertram 2009). Therefore, it was a priority to establish and sustain respectful and reciprocal relationships with the children and to avoid an approach that trivialised participation.

Flewitt's (2005) work on involving young children in research was useful in shaping the approach taken to ensure that children's participation was ethical and respectful of their changing views of the research. Flewitt reminds us that children's initial agreement to participate in research can only be provisional, as 'the precise course to be taken by the research is unpredictable' (2005, 4); this advice informed the approach adopted in the study, in which the methods were purposefully fluid and dynamic. I adopted an approach of 'slow listening' (Clark 2011) that involved participating in everyday classroom activities alongside the children over the eight-month research period, and developing methods to ensure their active involvement in the research process. For example, the video software adopted for the research was selected specifically for the potential it offered for children to take the lead role in deciding which play activities they watched and discussed. The films were viewed on a laptop to ensure a flexible approach that enabled the children to choose when, where and with whom they watched the films. Allowing sufficient time for children to exercise their chosen modes of engagement in the research was a key consideration and children often incorporated their viewings within their everyday routines at home and in the classroom. The filmed material elicited a range of responses from the children. Sometimes children provided 'running commentaries' as they watched; on other occasions the films prompted conversations with friends and family members. Communication, particularly with young children, involves more processes than the exchange of spoken language (Flewitt et al. 2014) and the children also used non-verbal modes of communication to share their responses to viewing the filmed documentation of their play.

The initial stages of analysis involved the ascribing of codes to the transcripts taken from the audio recordings of participants' responses to the films. A research journal was used to record non-verbal responses, and these were also included in the coding process. As Charmaz (2006, 48) suggests, these 'initial codes are provisional, comparative and grounded in the data'. The longitudinal nature of the study was invaluable to this process and the early identification of provisional codes. As the research proceeded and transcripts accumulated, coded responses were grouped to develop categories. Once categories had been identified, further analysis took place to inform the development of a thematic framework. At this stage I began to draw upon existing understandings of funds of knowledge to support the analytic process. As Charmaz and Mitchell (2001, 169) argue, 'theory can breathe through ethnographic and grounded theory and animate it' and the use of theory helped to present participants' perspectives within a coherent framework (Fetterman 2010; Siraj-Blatchford 2010). However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study's findings: this framework emerged from a specific social and cultural context (Charmaz 2006) and I embrace guidance from Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) that any attempt to generalise from single cases should be taken with caution.

This paper presents the perspectives of children and their parents, interspersed with my observations and analysis, to exemplify some ways in which the children's play interests were mediated by their participation in the interconnected contexts of the classroom, the home and the wider community. Analysis of the findings is informed by a funds of knowledge lens. The children's and parents' commentaries of the play that are presented below reflect a naturalised approach to transcription. This approach acknowledges the socially and culturally situated nature of the research and hence places value upon regional dialects and young children's speech patterns. When this may impact upon the clarity of



the text, additions to the original transcripts have been placed within squared [] brackets. Pseudonyms have been used to assist confidentiality.

Findings

The go-kart

This episode of play took place in the construction area of the classroom. One of the key children in the study, Craig, was with a group of children who were using wooden blocks and plastic crates to make a go-kart. This was a sustained play experience that lasted for more than 30 minutes. Craig and another child, Jamie, remained involved throughout, whilst other children moved in and out of the play. The discussion that follows draws upon the transcriptions of Craig's conversational responses to the footage at school with his peers and at home with his parents.

While watching the filmed footage, Craig's parents indicated that Craig had acquired technical knowledge from regular experiences of observing and assisting his father, Paul, in his garage workshop:

Yeah in terms of what he was doing there, what he says I suppose it comes from that [helping in the workshop]. We go off in [the] big van to get engines, and those sorts of things he was doing there. I ask him to help me unload [the] van at [the] end of [the] day.

When watching the film at home, Craig pointed to Jamie and reminded his father that they saw him,

with his dad at that thing at the garage.

Paul elaborated on Craig's comments and explained that they had recently attended an event for go-kart enthusiasts at a local garage. Craig and Jamie's classroom play appeared to draw upon mutual funds of knowledge acquired from their shared experiences of garages and go-karts. At one point Jamie introduced the idea that they needed to buy a new engine, and Craig departed to another part of the classroom, later calling upon Jamie to assist him in carrying 'the engine' back to the workshop. The following conversation took place when Craig later viewed this episode of the play with another child, Jake, who was not involved in the go-kart play:

- Craig: (*Pauses film*) That were [the] motor for [the] kart. I just found it there (*points towards book area*).
 Jake: What's that? A pillow?
 Craig: No, it's the motor. Not a pillow. (*Pauses, looks directly at Jake. Frowns and squeezes hands together*). That is a pillow, but it's the motor.

Craig's response indicates the transformational dimensions associated with the playful use of materials. Craig knew that he was carrying a pillow, but his response illuminates how he drew upon funds of knowledge from activities located in his father's workshop to ascribe new meanings and characteristics to classroom equipment. The real characteristics of the pillow were suspended in the play frame; it became as heavy as an engine and hence required help from Jamie to transport it back to the children's workshop. Jamie and Craig's mutual funds of knowledge enabled them to perform the act of transporting the pillow-transformed-to-engine together. Thus, it appears that Craig and Jamie's play

enabled them to practise and make meaning of funds of knowledge amassed from their participation in the cultural activities and rituals of the garage workshop. However, not all children involved in the play shared their knowledge. The film captures a moment of disagreement when Craig forcibly removed a plastic hammer from another child, Jon:

Craig: (*Pauses film. Turns to look at Paul, his father. Grave facial expression*). Look, Jon put [the] light in [the] wrong place. You have to do it [the] other way. You have to wire and hammer it through that way (*extends arm to his side*). Look, I'm showing him.

Craig's grave response to watching Jon's errors when fixing the go-kart frames the play as a meaningful, serious activity: Craig was drawing upon technical funds of knowledge to perform the actions of a mechanic. Viewed through this lens, one begins to understand his frustration at Jon's lack of expertise in attaching the light to the go-kart. However, Jon's inability to draw upon real experiences limited his role in the play to that of assistant. His ideas and suggestions were rejected by Craig and Jamie, and his continued involvement required him to comply with and perform in accordance to their narrative.

The birthday party

This episode focuses on a sequence taken from a period of play lasting nearly one hour, in which two children, Ellie and Lily, were preparing for a birthday party. The children had already written party invitations and they were now preparing the food for the party. The play took place at the play dough table. When viewing the footage of this episode of play, Tracey, the class teacher, commented:

Ellie often chooses to play with the play-dough, it's a big interest for her and has been for some time. I've got several observations of her in this area.

By contrast, Ellie and her mother's voices offered an alternative reading of Ellie's interests. While watching the filmed material at their home, Ellie ran into the kitchen, returning with a cooking apron and carrying a small plastic bowl and spoon, announcing, 'we bake cakes, don't we mum?' Ellie's response reiterates the importance of taking account of young children's non-verbal responses as well as their spoken comments. Her actions prompted a long conversation about the household's shared love of cooking and baking, from which Ellie had acquired funds of knowledge that she revisited and reconstructed in her play with the dough.

Later in the filmed footage, Ellie and Lily could be heard welcoming imaginary guests to their party. Upon viewing this, Ellie's mother, Vicky, commented:

Oh is everyone arriving? You're sitting them all down, ain't you? (*turns to me, laughing*) when she says 'come in, come in have a seat' – that's me that is. That's just like me.

Like Craig in the garage workshop, Ellie drew upon funds of knowledge acquired from observing her mother's behaviour to perform the role of a hostess in her play. Previous conversations had established that Lily had been ill and unable to go to Ellie's party; however, she evidently had sufficient knowledge from previous experiences of birthday parties to be able to join Ellie in playing with the cultural scripts of writing invitations, preparing and arranging party food, and welcoming guests. The two children also drew upon funds of knowledge from popular culture to co-construct the imaginary scenario:

Ellie: Oh look I **am** (*emphasised*) big now, a big girl and ‘cause look ... (*pauses the film*) I’ve got a dress and silver shoes and I’ve got a party buffet! And here’s Lily the princess.

Vicky: Oh you’ve got a really good accent. ‘Would you like a burger?’ Is it American? Oh that’s off of Rapunzel, isn’t it?

These comments relate to a turning point in the children’s play in which the narrative migrated from a shared knowledge of parties into a world in which Ellie was transformed into a ‘big girl’ and Lily a ‘princess’. Their play could be understood as a blending of meanings: funds of knowledge from the real-world meeting those from popular culture. Ellie and Lily re-constructed their mutual understanding of parties and explored the possibility of transformation: Yorkshire schoolgirls performed as American princesses. Their mutual interests enabled a coordination of meanings and intentions that brought complexity to the play.

Another girl, Jessica, was present at the play dough table for some of the time. Jessica’s attempts to join in appeared to be rejected by Ellie and Lily, and it was apparent that Ellie did not consider her to be part of the play:

Vicky: Oh and there’s another little girl with you, who’s that, Ellie?
 Ellie: She, she’s not in our game (*shaking head*).

Jessica had recently joined the class and had not been invited to Ellie’s birthday party. Conversations with the class teacher indicated that Jessica and her family had lived through some difficult circumstances, and it could be surmised that her experience of the cultural rituals associated with birthdays may be somewhat different to those shared by Ellie and Lily. Consequently, Jessica was unable to draw upon mutual funds of knowledge to gain access to the play; her activity was restricted to a material engagement with the play dough that lacked the transformational, co-constructed characteristics of Ellie and Lily’s play.

The school fete

The third episode of play is based upon a group encounter in which the children reconstructed their recent, shared experiences of participating in face painting and games at the school fete. The following conversations took place between Ellie and Jake when they viewed the filmed footage a week later:

Ellie: Look, we were painting faces and we were face painting and [doing] tattoos.
 Jake: Did we do this after dinner?
 Ellie: No this aft [afternoon]. No, yeah, in the morning when we’d had (*pauses*). After register. So we could have more time, ‘cause in the morning there’s time for all that.
 Jake: I’m not in it, but I was with you, wasn’t I?
 Ellie: You had to go t’ shop.
 Jake: The shop?
 Ellie: Well you actually went to Mrs. Dalton’s table.

Ellie’s narrative demonstrates the collective strategies that the children employed to adapt their play to the other demands of classroom life. Jake was called to the teacher’s table and had to leave the play. However, Ellie cited a plausible reason for his departure that allowed

the play to continue without him, whilst simultaneously enabling him to return once he had completed his activity with the teacher. This could be interpreted as a sophisticated strategy for collaboration; Jake's withdrawal and subsequent return to the play required a mutual interest and knowledge of school fete practices. It is of interest that Jessica also participated in this play episode:

Ellie: Look Lily, that's you, playing passy-the-parcel with Jessica and Damion. And Harry was making sure you all got a turn. I wrapped the parcel up and it were really difficult.

While Jessica was excluded from the birthday party play, she was able to take part in this episode of group play. She had participated in the 'real' fete alongside her peers, enabling her to draw upon and reconstruct meaning from mutually constituted funds of knowledge.

Discussion

These three episodes illustrate how children's interests can be interpreted as funds of knowledge amassed from their everyday engagement in the activities of the home, the classroom and the wider community, including popular culture. These examples are indicative of the wider study from which they were taken, which found that children's play interests were frequently informed by a motivation to connect with and make meaning of the sociocultural worlds which they inhabited (Chesworth 2015). In sociodramatic play, children exhibited points of reference from the home culture as they performed the rituals, interactions and practices of birthday parties and garage workshops. In so doing, children drew upon funds of knowledge amassed from their participation in domestic activity: they made meaning of culturally situated social understandings to welcome guests, and of technical skills to mend engines. In a similar fashion, children also played with the practices and behaviours of the classroom community: they performed as teachers and organised face painting and games at the school fete. Furthermore, children appropriated knowledge gained from popular culture and the media to reconstruct scenarios in which elements of real and fantasy worlds were interwoven to create the play narrative. Therefore, the findings support the proposal (Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan 2011) that funds of knowledge offer a lens for engaging with and responding to children's interests in relation to their social and cultural experiences. Viewed through this lens, play is conceptualised as a potential cultural broker (Walker and Nokon 2007) that enables children to reconstruct interests amassed from funds of knowledge, thus bridging the space between home and school cultures (Broadhead and Burt 2012) and developing children's 'ability to function competently in multiple contexts' (Walker and Nokon 2007, 178).

The availability of flexible, un-prescribed classroom materials, such as blocks, fabric and play-dough, offered multiple affordances for children to draw upon their interests and construct meaning in their play. Hence, the findings support the proposition that such resources offer more inclusive opportunities than realistic play props for children to explore their interests and make meaning of their diverse identities (Bodrova 2008; Broadhead and Burt 2012). However, in common with Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan's (2011) research findings, teachers' interpretations of children's play interests frequently focused upon children's engagement with the play materials per se. By contrast, children's and parents' perspectives indicated how classroom resources acted as cultural artefacts, in



which children drew upon their interests to imagine and ascribe new meanings to objects in their play: dough became party food; a pillow an engine.

As Bodrova proposes (2008), imagination is not innate, but instead builds upon children's early experiences within their family and community that are first manifested in play. It is through the act of imagination that children are able to give meaning to objects in their play as they strive to connect with and reconstruct their social and cultural worlds (Fleer 2011). The examples discussed in this paper have indicated some ways in which play affords opportunities for children to play with adult scripts (Göncü 1987) that have interest to them, and to perform roles that are potentially complex and creative (Holzman 2010). In particular, shared interests arising from mutual funds of knowledge afforded opportunities for the co-construction of meaning during collaborative play. Shared cultural repertoires and experiences facilitated a bridging of meanings (Rogoff 2003) that enabled the children to negotiate their intentions and to coordinate their activity. The examples discussed in this paper are indicative of the study's findings that play arising from mutual interests often demonstrated elements of 'togetherness' (Van Oers and Hannikainen 2001), whereby the children negotiated obstacles and challenges – both within and beyond the play frame – in order to sustain the play.

However, whilst this paper recognises the possibilities for complex, creative play that can emerge when children draw upon and reconstruct funds of knowledge, the findings also raise questions regarding the influence that differing funds of knowledge may have upon the manifestation of power, agency and choice with young children's peer cultures. In 'the go-kart', Craig and Jamie drew upon interests arising from their mutual knowledge of garages and vehicles to bring complexity to their play. Meanwhile, Jon's inexperience required him to adopt a lower status role – one that he was allocated by his more knowledgeable peers. Togetherness in this episode of play was not established through coordination of activity, but compliance. This interpretation resonates with Janson's (2008, 116) proposition that togetherness is sometimes characterised by an oscillation between horizontal peer relations that promote coordinated play themes, and vertical relations in which 'submissiveness is the less influential member's acceptance price'. Whilst Jon was unable to be a full participant in the play, the alternative was to withdraw from the play altogether. Likewise, in 'the birthday party' Jessica lacked the culturally defined funds of knowledge associated with birthdays and parties; her attempts to be accepted in the play were rejected by Ellie and Lily. Göncü (1998) proposes that establishing a shared focus requires players to perceive some similarity in experiences: this was seemingly not the case for Jessica, and the example raises somewhat uncomfortable questions regarding inclusion and exclusion from play in relation to interests that emerge from children's diverse social and cultural experiences and heritages.

Early years teachers occupy the borderlands between adult and peer cultures (Corsaro 1985) and, as such, some power differentials between children will always exist beyond the gaze or the influence of adults. Furthermore, as Broadhead and Burt (2012, 155) suggest, 'a capacity for conflict resolution is an important part of identity development' and isolated incidences of exclusion are arguably an important aspect of learning to participate in any cultural group. However, this does not preclude the need for teachers to adopt a more reflexive understanding of the interplay of power and agency within the classroom. The findings from this study indicate that a more critical consideration is required of the insights that funds of knowledge can offer in relation to how children's interests act as

devices for inclusion or exclusion; collaboration or compliance. In ‘the birthday party’, Ellie’s teachers focused upon her interest in the play dough, yet this offers no illumination as to why Jessica was excluded from the play. By contrast, an interpretation of interest based upon funds of knowledge illuminates the dynamics operating within this relationship and offers insight into Jessica’s peripheral engagement in the play.

In contrast to the incidents of marginalisation and exclusion that arose in ‘the go-kart’ and ‘the birthday party’, the play in ‘the fete’ was characterised by children demonstrating sophisticated strategies for inclusion, in which all the players exercised agency in their collective reconstruction of mutually constituted funds of knowledge. Whilst it would be naive to suggest that this will always be the case, the episode demonstrates the possibilities for co-construction that are afforded by mutual interests that arise from shared experiences within the classroom community.

Early years classrooms and settings can be seen as potentially rich meeting places for children, families and teachers from diverse backgrounds to play and interact (Broadhead and Burt 2012). However, as Moss (2007, 12) argues, it requires intentional action and a shift in thinking for settings to become genuine places for democratic ‘encounter and dialogue’. The teachers in this study knew the children and their families well enough to recognise some aspects of domestic activity that were reconstructed in play, but such insights were incidental; they were not used to understand children’s interests or to bring further complexity to play. The interpretations of play offered by the children and parents illuminated the diverse ways in which children’s sociocultural experiences underpinned their play interests. Thus, a more informed understanding of the interests that children bring to their play requires opportunities for meaningful dialogue between teachers, children and parents. However, English educational policy positions play as a vehicle for delivering national learning goals (Rogers 2011) and this creates challenges for understanding play in relation to diverse sociocultural practices. Within this policy structure, teachers’ interpretations of play are governed by curriculum frameworks that privilege universal, individualised learning intentions over the everyday lived experiences of children and families. It is argued here that ‘funds of knowledge’ offer an alternative lens through which teachers can interpret children’s play, analyse their practice and articulate the ways in which current provision for play may serve to privilege certain interests over others. Importantly, this approach could also prompt informed discussion regarding matters of inclusion and exclusion and how they can be better understood and addressed within early years settings.

Conclusion

Whilst acknowledging the small-scale and culturally specific context of this study, the insider perspectives of children and their parents reported in this article have provided original insights into some ways in which children’s play interests were mediated by participation in sociocultural activity. The findings indicate some recommendations for practice that would enable a funds of knowledge approach to strengthen curriculum and pedagogical decisions informed by children’s play choices and interests. Pedagogical practice informed by dialogue with children and their families may enhance professional understandings of how children’s interests emerge from the everyday practices of homes and communities. A critical understanding of how children’s diverse experiences

inform their individual and collective interests could prompt increased sensitivity to the meanings that children ascribe to their play. The examples presented in this article have demonstrated how such interests afford possibilities for children to co-construct complex and creative play. However, this article has also indicated some ways in which differing access to funds of knowledge may contribute to children's status, inclusion and exclusion from play. Further research with children and those closest to them is required to extend critical understandings of the ways in which diverse funds of knowledge contribute to the interplay of power and agency within children's peer cultures.

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