Recontextualising 'Play' in Early Years Pedagogy: Competence, Performance and Excess in Policy and Practice

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RECONTEXTUALISING 'PLAY' IN EARLY YEARS PEDAGOGY: COMPETENCE, PERFORMANCE AND EXCESS IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: *This paper traces the way discourses within early years policy and practice impose meanings onto the signifier 'play'. Drawing on Bernstein's conceptualisation of recontextualising strategies, we explore how these meanings regulate troubling excesses in children's 'play'. The analysis foregrounds an underlying question about the hold the signifier 'play' maintains within discourses that appear antithetical to traditional understandings of 'play'.*

Keywords: *play, Bernstein, early years, recontextualising strategies, pedagogic discourse*

1. Preface: 'Play'?

It may be useful to begin by juxtaposing a fieldnote with two theoretical extracts, and wondering about the ways in which they might offer an initial framing for our discussion of 'play'.

> Fieldnote: an outdoor café in a park, a weekday lunchtime, 12/03/12.
> A small girl – 2, maybe – is walking in a slightly odd tripping step around the tables. Her mother, walking a few steps behind her, occasionally calls her name, quietly. Sometimes the little girl looks back at her mother, but most of the time she looks ahead, seemingly engaged in her surroundings – or some version of her surroundings: we have no idea what thoughts, fantasies, imaginaries shape this engagement with the world. Sometimes she changes direction, or, when another child appears, briefly runs after them, adapting her gait, her direction apparently more open to interpretation than her previous path between the tables. After a while, the girl goes to stand near where her mother has by now sat down. She stands facing the bench and engages herself picking up and putting down two plastic figures. Then she takes the two figures over to the café gate and balances them between the wooden spikes.

Is this play? Is it learning? What might it mean to name it as such? And how might such a naming shape, direct or regulate adult responses to the girl's activity?

Derrida, in a discussion of the impossibility of limiting language to intentional meanings, describes the relation between language and discourse as 'freeplay'. He explains: 'This field is in fact that of *freeplay*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble' (1978, p. 365). Perhaps this notion

of 'a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble' might help us to think about the activity observed in the fieldnote: the girl's movement is one of an infinite number of possible pathways through the garden of the café.

Bernstein evokes a similar sense of the potential for infinite substitution in his account of the way meanings construct relations between worlds:

> [. . .] the meanings which create and unite two worlds must always be meanings where there is an indirect relation between these meanings and a specific material base [. . .]
>
> If these meanings have an indirect relation to a specific material base, the meanings themselves create a gap or a space. If meanings are consumed by the context and wholly embedded in the context, there is no space. But if these meanings have an indirect relation to a specific material base, because they are indirect, there must be a gap. Intrinsic to these meanings is the potential of a gap, (a space) which I will term *a potential discursive gap*. [. . .][1]
>
> What is it a potential of? I want to suggest that this gap or space can become (not always) a site for alternative possibilities, for alternative realisations of the relation between the material and the immaterial. The gap itself can change the relation between the material and the immaterial. This potential gap or space I will suggest is the site for the unthinkable, the site of the impossible, and this site can clearly be both beneficial and dangerous at the same time. This gap is the meeting point of order and disorder, of coherence and incoherence. It is the crucial site of the *yet to be thought.* (2000, p. 30)

Might we understand the activity described in the fieldnote as a meaning that unites the young girl with her surroundings? Is the activity an enactment of one of many alternative realisations of this relation? Thought of in this way, we can understand the space in which the girl's activity emerges as a 'site of the *yet to be thought'*, a potential for meanings that may be beneficial or dangerous. It is the way the child's activity – which we might call 'play' – foregrounds or extends the potential for substitution beyond the more rigid discursive framings of social interaction that both fascinates and threatens the world of order and coherence. The threat is posed both in the tangible or fleshy risks embodied in the failure to recognise danger and in the lurking potential to disrupt social conventions – and in the other side of both of these: the possible re-emergence of our own persistent fascination with these transgressive pleasures. These unregulated desires are repressed on entry into what sometimes get named as 'adult' social relations, but this repression is never complete, and we might understand the 'adult' relation to 'play' as a response to the re-evocation of this transgressive desire.

We might, then, understand 'play' as an opening up of the field of potential relations beyond the naturalised framings of the 'adult' social world. Starting from this reflection on one possible way of understanding 'play', we want to look at the way different meanings have come to be attached to this signifier within contemporary discourses of early years education. The paper has three aspects or arguments: first, it traces the intersecting discourses that colonise or impose meanings onto the signifier 'play'; secondly, it draws on Bernstein's conceptualisation of the recontextualising strategies instantiated in different models of

pedagogy to explore how these meanings are invoked to regulate the excesses of children's 'play' activities in observed early years classroom practice; and thirdly, it foregrounds an underlying question about the hold the signifier 'play' seems to maintain within discourses that are in many ways antithetical to ways in which 'play' has traditionally been understood. The juxtaposition of Derrida's account of 'freeplay' and Bernstein's conceptualisation of the discursive gap as a site of the unthinkable might help us to account for the ongoing fascination/repulsion that 'play' appears to holds for both educators and policy makers.

2. RESONANCES BETWEEN BERNSTEIN'S ANALYSIS OF 'PLAY' AND HIS CONCEPTUALISATION OF COMPETENCE AND PERFORMANCE MODELS OF PEDAGOGIC PRACTICE

In his classic work *Class and Pedagogies: Visible and Invisible* (1975) Bernstein theorises the relationship between invisible/visible pedagogies and middle- and working-class cultures in infant education, and in doing so reflects on the recontextualisation of play in the theory and practice of progressive pedagogy. The paper can be thought of as an incisive sociological analysis of infant education of the day and, at the same time, prophetic in its identification of certain themes that persist in the prevailing discourses of play pedagogies, particularly in the contemporary English context. Bernstein argues that 'play' – which he refuses to define (p. 10) – is fundamental to invisible pedagogies because it is the 'means by which the child exteriorizes himself [sic] to the teacher' (p. 10). He foregrounds the way that 'play' in educational settings has become the instrument by which teachers evaluate children's behaviours within the parameters of a specific ideological and pedagogical context. In the educational settings of the time, he observed, 'Play does not merely describe an activity: it also contains an evaluation of that activity. Thus, there is productive play and less productive play, obsessional and free-ranging play, solitary and social play' (Bernstein, 1975, p. 10). This constitutes an ironic critique of progressive pedagogies, which claim to value the child but in fact regulate their activity through mechanisms of surveillance that we have come to recognise as characteristic of the modern state (e.g. Foucault, 1977). Bernstein points out that in progressive pedagogies 'the spontaneity of the child is filtered through this surveillance and then implicitly shaped according to interpretation, evaluation and diagnosis'. The signifier 'play', in this analysis, references the way children's activity can be constituted as an element of educational surveillance and control: 'the more he [sic] plays and the greater the range of his activities, the more the child is made available to the teacher's screening' (1975, p. 10). Thus Bernstein's analysis of the pedagogisation of play in this period locates it firmly within the framework of 'invisible' pedagogic practice, which is both weakly classified and weakly framed, and which appears to afford a high degree of negotiation of meaning on the part of the play/acquirer. According to Bernstein's analysis, then, 'play' takes its central place in the language of pedagogy via the progressive ideologies that claimed to value the meanings of the child, in opposition to the more

traditional pedagogies which valued visible curricula boundaries and hierarchical teacher–pupil relations.

Since Bernstein's initial analysis, the signifier 'play' has been appropriated and resignified within diverse discourses of educational policy and practice. Throughout significant changes in the policy and research landscape of early years education, 'play' continues to be referenced as key to children's learning. However, the means by which activities identified as 'play' are 'interpreted', 'evaluated', 'diagnosed', and thus 'shaped' within educational settings no longer conform to the model Bernstein described in his account of invisible pedagogies.

The shifts in the meanings and practice of pedagogies of play resonate with broader shifts that Bernstein explored in his later work through the theorisation of competence and performance models of pedagogy (2000). This theorisation is distinctively sociological in that it emerges out of an analysis of the shifting social and political terrain and its dynamic relation to pedagogical practice. Bernstein marks out a series of what he calls 'oppositional forms'. While these might be taken to relate to the competence and performance models as a whole, it may be more appropriate to think of a series of oppositions that, taken together, can be identified with competence or performance as ideal types of pedagogic identities, each of which has 'a range of realisations' (Bernstein, 2000, p. xvii). Key oppositions relate to strength of classification of curricular knowledge, principles of evaluation, and the conceptualisation of the pedagogic text. Competence models are associated with weak classification of fields of curricular knowledge, so that 'acquirers apparently have a great measure of control over selection, sequence and pace' (ibid, p. 45). Performance models are associated with explicit specialisation of distinct curricular pathways. In competence models, evaluation focuses on what is present, rather than what is absent: meanings identified within the activity or products of the acquirer. This is in opposition to the use of externally defined criteria which thus constitute absences in the acquirer's activity (p. 46). Related to this, the pedagogic text itself can be conceptualised either as the inferred cognitive or affective development of the acquirer, externalised in activity or products, or as the performance itself. In competence models Bernstein suggests, teachers use their pedagogic expertise to interpret children's activity as representative of something other than itself: learning, development, or the child's own meanings. In performance models the focus of attention is the product itself, as opposed to an inference from the product to the learning, development or meanings of the child (pp. 47–48). Bernstein's account of the significance of 'play' within invisible pedagogies as the means by which children exteriorise themselves to the teacher has clear resonances with this account of the way that, in competence models, the teacher sees the child's activity or text as an exteriorisation of their development. Thus his formulation of competency and performance models might be understood as a re-articulation of his earlier account of visible and invisible pedagogies, disaggregating and repositioning distinct elements of pedagogic practice as they emerge in new historical and political formations. So, as Gemma Moss has pointed out: 'Competence and performance are neither co-terminous nor interchangeable

with invisible and visible. Rather, "invisible" and "visible" are subsumed by them' (2002, p. 552). Moss argues for an understanding of Bernstein's categories as always in progress, in active dialogue both with each other, with empirical data, and with the wider sociopolitical scene. She suggests that, rather than acting as finalist interpretations, his models provide 'a subtle and flexible means of bringing a range of different elements into relationship' (p. 550). Thus, just as there never existed pure instantiations of visible and invisible pedagogies, nor do competence and performance models exist separately, but rather, these opposing practices 'are always to some extent stalked by their shadow other' (p. 551). The distinct, oppositional elements brought together in Bernstein's models constitute contested resources in the production of pedagogic identities. In a similar way, we suggest in this paper, the signifier 'play' can be understood as a contested resource in the turbulent terrain of Early Years policy and pedagogical practice (see also Rogers, 2010).

Bernstein associates competence pedagogy with a 'liberal progressive, populist and radical' politics of education. This political stance intersects with the 'universal democracy of acquisition', 'an emphasis on the subject as self regulating' and 'a critical skeptical view of hierarchical relations' that constitutes the social logic of competence models (Bernstein, 2000, p. 43). Performance models, in contrast, are associated with a 'centralisation of control over the contents of education' (p. 58) which brings with it requirements for accountability instantiated in new discourses of management and assessment. These contrasting social logics encounter each other in a tussle over the formation of pedagogic identities. Bernstein's later analysis suggests different modes in which contrasting pedagogic resources coexist in contemporary articulations of the official and pedagogic recontextualising fields. His account of De-centred Market identities (2000, pp. 68–71), for example, depicts institutions given autonomy, and thus required to respond to market imperatives and standardisation mechanisms defined in the official field of policy, while, at the same time, maintaining an allegiance to retrospective 'grand narratives' (p. 66) of the curriculum. Bernstein suggests a psychical resonance of these fragmented pedagogic identities, describing them as 'the pedagogic schizoid position' (p. 77) in a relatively explicit reference to the work of Melanie Klein (see Lapping, 2010). Recent instantiations of pedagogies of 'play', we will argue, constitute a similar, psychically loaded, disaggregation and reconstitution of the elements of both invisible pedagogies and competence models, repositioning them as traces within the more 'visible' practices of performance pedagogies.

In relation to pedagogies of play, two 'grand narratives' that consistently re-emerge in articulations of contemporary practice are a liberal romantic philosophy of education (Darling, 1994) and psychological theories of cognitive development (Piaget, 1951; Sutherland 1992). In the paradigm of Romanticism, 'play' is associated with childhood innocence and the expression of instinctual desires. In developmental psychology, 'play' is also viewed as natural and innate, but the emphasis is on the functions and benefits of 'play' to cognitive development.

'Play' is a key signifier in the convergence of these two fields, and carries traces of these meanings into contemporary pedagogic discourse. Our analysis explores the re-articulation of the broken down elements of pedagogic grand narratives across the contrasting recontextualising fields represented by policy documents, teacher accounts and observed classroom practice.

3. MEANINGS ATTACHED TO THE SIGNIFIER 'PLAY' IN THE OFFICIAL AND PEDAGOGIC RECONTEXTUALISING FIELDS: A PEDAGOGIC SCHIZOID POSITION?

Bernstein suggests, slightly confusingly, that pedagogic discourse both *is* and *is constructed by* a 'recontextualising principle'. What he is drawing attention to in his use of this term is the dynamic relation between discourses, whereby any discourse is constituted by a principle that 'selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses and relates other discourses to constitute its own order' (2000, p. 33). Perhaps we might understand the recontextualising principle as related to a social logic, in that it is the principle by which elements of discourse are re-appropriated to construct a discursive order to support a particular social interest. This process of construction of order out of messy and contradictory discursive fields, made up of agents and institutions with diverse interests and ideologies, is not straightforward, and involves complex struggles over meanings and identities. In his account of pedagogic discourse, Bernstein differentiates between an 'official recontextualising field' (ORF), which he describes as created by the state and its representatives, and a 'pedagogic recontextualising field' (PRF) made up of specialist educational practitioners in schools, colleges and other specialist institutions of education (ibid.). Pedagogic discourse is produced in interaction producing chains of meanings within and across these different fields of practice. Bernstein suggests:

> If the PRF can have an effect on pedagogic discourse independently of the ORF, then there is both some autonomy and struggle over pedagogic discourse and its practices. But if there is only the ORF, then there is no autonomy. Today the state is attempting to weaken the PRF through its ORF, and thus attempting to reduce relative autonomy over the construction of pedagogic discourse and over its social constructs. (ibid., p. 33)

Our analysis in this paper attempts to trace this interaction between the ORF and the PRF in the construction of the pedagogic discourse of early childhood education. We have selected policy documents published between 1990 and 2008, a period of profound change in the landscape of early years policy, as instances of the ORF; and extracts from teacher accounts from this period as instances of the PRF. Our interest is in analysing the meanings attached to 'play' during this period and the ways in which these meanings shift as it is recontextualised, positioned in new discursive chains across contrasting fields of educational policy and practice. Analysis of relations between the official and pedagogic recontextualising fields

in the construction of 'play' within pedagogic discourse can help us to understand the conflicting and multiple meanings and ideologies that constitute the resources from which we struggle to construct coherent pedagogic identities in the context of early years education.

Meanings Attached to the Signifier 'Play' in Official Discourse

The analysis in this section draws mainly on the *Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DCSF, 2008a), a document which supported the implementation of the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008b) in England. The EYFS represented an extension and development of the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (CGFS), implemented in 2000. The CGFS officially endorsed a national framework for the education of children aged three to five in England and Wales and brought with it increased regulation of early years provision and pre-specified requirements for assessment of learning outcomes through the 'early learning goals'. The discursive shifts articulated in these documents can be traced to earlier policy moves in the Rumbold report (DES, 1990), 'Starting with Quality', commissioned by the government of the day to examine the state of early years provision in the immediate aftermath of the introduction of the National Curriculum. Rumbold inserted ideas of purpose, quality and the market into the understanding of play in the early years, setting an agenda for a more explicitly regulated and accountable educational provision for all three and four year olds. Later under New Labour, the EYFS statutory framework appeared at the same time as both *The Children's Plan* (DCSF, 2007) and the government's consultation agenda for a play strategy outlined in *Fair Play* (DCSF/DCMS, 2008). Taken together these documents offer an insight into the discourse of the official recontextualising field.

The stated aim of the Rumbold Report foregrounds the shift from the progressive child-centred ideals of the post-Plowden (see CACE, 1967) era to a more market driven ideology of accountability, talking about the 'quality' of educational experience and the need to take account of 'the requirements of the National Curriculum' and 'the government's expenditure plans' (DES, 1990). In line with this aim, within the document we see the emergence of the collocation of 'play' and 'purpose':

> For young children, *purposeful play* is an essential and rich part of the learning process. (DES, 1990, p.7)

This merging of 'play' and 'purpose' within a discourse of accountability articulates with a performance model in which 'play' is constructed and evaluated in relation to perceived absences in the child's practices, defined in relation to the criteria of an externally regulated curriculum. More specifically, Rumbold specified 'conditions' for the realisation of the potential value of play. These included adult involvement, careful planning and observation for the purpose of assessment, planning and extension of learning (p. 11, para 90).

The Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008a) is the most recent articulation of this understanding of 'play', and multiple meanings are attached to 'play' within the document. First, it is claimed as universal within both the delivery of the framework and the process of children's learning: 'Play underpins the delivery of *all* the EYFS'; 'Play underpins *all* development and learning for young children' (p. 7, our italics). The universalising 'all' constructs an identification between the statutory approach presented in the framework documentation and the 'natural' process of child development. This reiterates the idea of a 'universal democracy of acquisition' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 43) as a disaggregated element of the social logic of competence models.

Within the document 'play' is also frequently associated with the adjective 'spontaneous'. This adjective seems, though, to relate only to 'child initiated play based activities'. The document also endorses 'adult led play based activities', but these do not seem to be associated with adult spontaneity. It is suggested that practitioners should provide 'well planned experiences based on children's spontaneous play'. A section on 'adult led activities' suggests:

> Small group times are a good example of an adult-led activity – the adult has selected the time to encourage a particular aspect of learning or discuss a particular topic. (p. 7)

There is interesting slippage here between 'play based activities', 'activities' and 'experiences', as well as between 'spontaneity' and 'planning' – so that 'experiences' planned by an adult can count as 'play', while child initiated 'play' seems more likely to be 'spontaneous'. This overloading of the signifier with confused and potentially inconsistent meanings might be interpreted as a retraction of universalising claims about the relation between play and learning, which might imply a progressive or child-centred pedagogical approach. The EYFS guidance, in contrast to progressive pedagogies, 'requires providers to provide a balance of child-initiated and adult-led play-based activities' (p. 7). This ambivalence in relation to the potential implications of an unqualified assertion of the universal benefits of 'play' is evident in the way the signifier comes to be positioned in a string of other signifiers as 'play-based activities'. Despite references to the benefits of 'children's spontaneous play', the document seems to require a web of other meanings to fix the meaning of 'play' as a more controllable educational identity.

In accordance with this ambivalence in relation to 'play' as a solitary signifier, the EYFS guidance document does not offer a definition of 'play' as such, but instead provides examples to help practitioners to distinguish between 'child initiated' and 'adult led' play-based activities:

> When a child engages in a self chosen pursuit, this is child initiated activity. For example, a child might elect to play with a fire engine – fitting the driver behind the steering wheel, extracting the driver, replacing the driver, throwing the driver back into a box and introducing a different driver. Another instance of a child-initiated choice may be where a child takes ownership of an activity and 'subverts' it to a different purpose than intended. For example, a child might prefer to pour water

into a hole to make a puddle rather than watering the plants as the adult intended. Other child-initiated activities may be instigated when the child brings something to the setting – such as an experience of having been on a bus or visiting hospital. This might lead to the provision of resources, stories and pictures to support this interest. Whatever children bring is an indication of their current interest and should be supported. (DCSF, 2008, p. 7)

This extract, taken from the longest paragraph in the section of the guidance devoted to 'Play', is interesting in several ways. First, it is worth observing that the word 'play' itself does not appear. While it is understandable not to use the word itself within an account of what might count as a 'child-initiated play-based activity', this absence might also be interpreted as indicative of a more general ambivalence about meanings that 'play' can evoke: connotations of something potentially unbounded, excessive, and emotional. What we are offered here is highly sanitised: choosing which toy to play with, failing to follow instructions and making a puddle, reporting experiences from outside the classroom. There is no mention, also, of the troubling excess, the sex, death and violence that is so prevalent in young children's 'play' (Holland, 2003; Rosen, 2012; Sutton-Smith, 1997). This obliteration of the more threatening aspects of 'play' is also evident in the consultation document *Fair Play* (DCSF/DCMS, 2008). The opening pages cast 'play' as a homogenous good, asserting: 'a community where children are playing is a healthy and sustainable community' (p. 4). The introduction to the document goes on to define 'play' as 'what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests in their own way for their own reasons balancing fun with a sense of respect for themselves and others' (p. 6). The association of 'play' with children's own ideas and interests in the first half of the sentence is undercut by the insertion of the additional criterion of 'respect for themselves and others'. As in the EYFS guidance, there is an implicit ambivalence about the complicated, dangerous or transgressive elements that are also often associated with 'play', suggested by their absence in accounts of the way play might contribute to a 'healthy and sustainable community'.

The ambivalences evident in the account of 'play' within the EYFS guidance are paralleled in the section on 'assessment'. This section makes explicit the mechanisms of accountability that act as a limit for teachers' practice. The guidance makes reference to 'assessment for learning', suggesting that assessment processes are intended to inform teachers' planning to meet the specific needs of the children in their care. It also distinguishes between 'formative' and 'summative' assessment, suggesting that both are valued aspects of early years pedagogic practice. Formative assessment is described as 'the type of assessment based on observations, photographs, video, things children have made or drawn and information from parents' and 'informs or guides everyday planning', while summative assessment is 'a summary of all the formative assessment' (DCFS, 2008a, p. 12). Neither of these seems to restrict what might be taken as the object of the teacher's assessment. However, the document goes on to specify externally imposed criteria for summative assessment. While conceding that 'You can use

your professional judgment to decide how much record keeping is necessary' it confirms 'you must undertake the EYFS Profile for all children of an appropriate age and assess them through observational assessment against all the 13 scales and report 13 scores for each child' (2008a, p. 13). The obligation to record assessments against 13 specified scales acts as a regulatory limit for both formative and summative modes of assessment. The apparent openness of the initial definitions is called into question by the structure of the profile. Clearly, it can be argued that teachers are free to assess children's 'spontaneous play' as exteriorisation of many different forms of learning. In practice, however, the requirement to complete the EYFS profile must significantly shape the observation and assessment practices of the teacher. As Moss has pointed out in a development of Bernstein's model, 'what the current round of performance pedagogy demands of the texts it creates is the ability to be endlessly recontextualised from one context of assessment to another' (2002, p. 557). We can relate this 'multi-functionality of the text' to the conflicting guidance about the use of teacher observations. The guidance on 'formative assessment' leaves space for teachers to awaken the ghosts of progressive pedagogy: a child's picture might be interpreted as part of a 'child-led activity', and used to follow up learning based on 'presences' within the activity. However, it might at the same time have a place in the EYFS Profile, and as such it will have to be assessed and scored against the 13 scales attached to the early learning goals, which necessarily constitute absences within a child's activity. The proposed revised version of the EYFS to be launched in 2012 has reduced the scale points in number but this is unlikely to affect the cultural shift to performance modes of assessment that has already taken hold in contemporary practice.

Meanings Attached to the Signifier 'Play' in Pedagogic Discourse

In this section we revisit data from studies conducted at two different points in time and with slightly different foci. The first is an ethnographic study of role play in the Foundation Stage in three reception classes[2] using observation, interviews and child-focused methods of data collection (see Rogers and Evans, 2008). The second is a slightly later study of practitioner perspectives on the EYFS more broadly, conducted through focus group interviews with groups of practitioners, including reception class teachers (see Brooker *et al.*, 2010). Our analysis traces ambivalences and complexities in teachers' accounts of their use of play, suggesting the way official discourse intersects with the grand narratives of progressive pedagogies.

As in the EYFS guidance, there were competing meanings attached to 'play' in the teachers' accounts, and these in some ways paralleled those in the policy documents. Teachers in the role play study reiterated associations to spontaneity, and referred to children choosing, and to 'free flow playing'. However, these evocations of child-centred notions of play were undercut in various ways in the accounts. There were explicit shifts from a discourse of children's choice

to one imbued with the learning objectives of the Foundation Stage: 'handling money', 'literacy', 'animals', 'social interaction', 'decision making', 'self esteem'. In addition, teachers' accounts of sources of ideas for role play echoed the language of policy in the field. They talked about children developing ideas they had seen at home or in the classroom – as opposed to a more romantic notion of the expression of instinctual feeling and imagination. One teacher almost exactly replicated the hedging noted in *Fair Play* (DCSF/DCMS, 2008), qualifying an assertion of freedom with a requirement to regulate potential harm to other children: 'I also think it's one of the reasons why they enjoy it so much is that they've got the freedom to do what they like with it, as long as they're not being abusive to other children' (Teacher 2, Role Play study).

This kind of hedging or categorisation of play into legitimate or illegitimate emerged throughout the teachers' accounts, with 'good quality play' being opposed to instances when children's activities did not seem to be productive. They suggested that sometimes 'play becomes stagnant' or described times when children 'seemed unable to develop any quality play'. These references to children's apparently unproductive activity suggest the teachers' need to connect 'play' with identifiable learning objectives. In these associations, the more uncontrolled connotations of 'play' that might threaten the order and coherence of the classroom are excluded. The construction of linear pathways of, in Bernstein's terms, the vertical discourse of formal education, attempt to exclude the unnameable, and therefore 'unproductive' aspects of children's activity. These 'unproductive' aspects are always present, but, it seems, from these teachers' accounts, are not easily seen or talked about within current professional discourse. The elements identified as 'stagnant' are those aspects of the material base – the children's activity – that are not recognised in the teachers' discourse (Bernstein, 2000, p. 30). That which is 'stagnant' is that which does not conform to the requirement for purpose and objectives and therefore remains in the '*site of the yet to be thought*' (p. 30).

While teachers seemed to assume and accept a distinction between 'good quality' and 'stagnant' play, they also articulated a more explicit awareness of conflicts within the discourse and practice of play based learning. They talked about the frustration of, for example, the over-emphasis on planning for play, when it should come out of children's interests, and of having to interrupt children's play to move them onto the next timetabled curriculum area. One teacher, for example, explicitly linked these pressures to the shifting policy context though her early career, the introduction of the National Curriculum and, now, the current shift in the new guidance for the Foundation Stage, which tried to promote play again, but which she felt had come too late to have an impact (Role Play Study, Teacher 1). The focus groups on the EYFS also elicited teachers' own analyses of the contradiction between the avowed support for 'play' in the early years and the restrictive requirements for assessment and accountability: 'it's not about the EYFS – it's about the profile and the expectations of government for data'; 'It's about the obsession with sticking a number on everybody'; 'this whole thing with the data';

'they're trying to make something that's not numerical numerically meaningful' (FG interview).

This tension between assertions of the value of 'play' and other accountability requirements was crystallised in relation to assessment, where good practice suggested that teachers should observe children's learning through play, but because, as one teacher put it, 'you're stuck with your teaching group', there wasn't actually time to record more than superficial observations about the areas or activities that children engaged with independently. This critique is clearly formulated within a discourse of accountability, where the practice of recording learning is not questioned. Teachers in both interviews and focus groups referred to the need to account to inspectors and parents as a potential or actual constraint on their practice. A more radical critique of the assessment regime was also articulated, evoking a previous era, by pointing out how the recording process itself interrupts the teacher's physical engagement in children's activities:

> you've got this barrier, either a clip board or post it notes and your writing . . .
> sometimes you just want to get rid of it all and you just want to like get on in there
> and have fun with the children and you know in your own mind as a teacher what
> your children can do and what they can't do. (Focus Group: Reception Class Teacher)

This foregrounds the barrier the requirement to record constructs between teacher and child, and an awareness that this is done in the interests of accountability, not of learning.

Thus, alongside the complex and contradictory understandings of play, and the simultaneous articulation and critique of the EYFS curricular framework, teachers maintained an attachment to a more play based approach and claimed that this was still important to their practice. In some instances the claims appeared slightly rhetorical but there were also more concrete accounts of how, in particular contexts, it was still possible to support play based learning.

The competing imperatives apparent in teachers' accounts of their practice can be understood in relation to the psychical construction of professional or institutional identities. As we have mentioned, Bernstein talks about a 'pathological position in education' brought about by coexistence of external and internal agendas in the classroom, and refers to 'the pedagogic schizoid position' (2000, p. 77). What he is referencing here (Klein, 1935 [1986]; Lapping, 2011) is a psychoanalytic understanding of the way that individual or institutional identities are formed through processes of projective identification, taking on characteristics from outside to fill out emptiness, inadequacy and fears about survival associated with the necessary incompleteness of any identity. More specifically, the teachers' accounts of play suggest the way that educational institutions and pedagogic practices are constituted in identification with values from outside education, the values of the market and of accountability (see Bernstein, ibid, p. 55), rather than in the construction of an autonomous sense of educational value. In Kleinian psychoanalytic terms, the paranoid schizoid position, the source of Bernstein's neologism, is associated with the psychical defence of splitting, as well as projection, and we might

perhaps interpret the distinctions teachers drew between 'quality play' and activity that is 'stagnant', when children 'don't have the ideas to move it on' as an instance of this unconscious process. 'Quality play' is a fantasy of productivity that feeds teachers' sense of their own professionalism; while 'stagnant' time or inactivity within the classroom is a fantasy into which they project fears of failure, inadequacy and life threatening peril.

4. THE STRUGGLE FOR 'PLAY' IN THE CLASSROOM: INTERRUPTION, REGULATION AND EXCESS

While it is clear from this analysis of teacher accounts that there is a complex struggle over meanings and practices of 'play' within the pedagogic recontextualising field, it cannot reveal what is actually happening in the classroom. How are teachers' attachments to 'play' translated in the classroom? This section draws on observation data from two studies: the first from the ESRC role play project and the second from a current ESRC project on outdoor play.[3] Both studies included significant periods of observation of children and of the way institutional and professional practice shaped the development of their activity. In some instances teachers were observed to interrupt what children were doing. There were also times when teachers joined in activities the children had initiated. Often children regulated their own activities, reiterating the rules established by adults.[4] There were also instances where children were observed in what might be understood as wilder, excessive activity. In both projects, this tended to be most evident when children were given freer range to explore outside spaces, often without a directly intervening adult presence.

The conflicts presented by the attempt to facilitate 'play' within the curriculum were evident in the studies (Rogers and Evans, 2008; Waite *et al*., 2011). So, for example, children were taken away from fantasy play when it was their turn to take part in timetabled reading or handwriting work. In a similar way, teachers frequently intervened when children's activities became boisterous or noisy. In some instances, however, teachers responded to noisy or boisterous activities in a way that appears more consistent with an attachment to pedagogies of play. One teacher, Miss Smith, was observed to join in with the children at times when other teachers might have regulated noise levels. The activity she intervened in was in the 'role play' area, which had been set up to resemble a cafe:

> The noise level has become so great that the play is 'spilling over' into the adjacent work area. The teacher comes into the café and takes the role of the customer:
> Miss Smith: Are you open?
> Greg: Yes
> Miss Smith: Have you got a menu in your café?
> One of the boys hands the teacher a menu.
> Miss Smith: What flavour soups have you got?
> Greg: Mint
> Miss Smith: Mint, what other soup have you got?
> Greg: Tomato

Miss Smith: Have you got oxtail soup?
Freddie: Yeah
Miss Smith: Right I'll have that then with a bread roll and butter
Robbie comes in and asks Miss Smith if he can come in to the café.
Teacher: [in role] You'll have to ask the others, I'm not Miss Smith, I'm Amy today.
(Fieldnote)

At one level, we can see Miss Smith's engagement as sustaining the idea that learning can take place through play. She doesn't explicitly use her authority to curtail the noise, and her presence as a play fellow apparently disrupts traditional hierarchies: she takes on the role of customer in the café and adopts a fantasy identity as 'Amy'. However, at the same time, her presence has the intended effect of distracting the children from whatever had instigated the increase in noise levels. The role she takes and her specific interventions accept the framing set by the curricular space of the café in the role play area. This can be interpreted as an instance where the teacher struggles to maintain her conception of play alongside the need for order within the constraints of the Early Years Framework, which both constructs and constrains the institutional space. It is illustrative of the 'range of realisations' (Bernstein, 2000, p. xvii) in contemporary instantiations of competence and performance models. In other words we might ask: What does the construction of a 'role play' area signify in this setting? Does it signify freedom and fantasy? Or does it signify the technologies of educational accountability?

In contrast to this, the 'Outdoor Play' study produced data where children were outside for extended periods with relatively little explicit adult intervention. This was timetabled as 'outdoor play' and took place in a designated, asphalt play area attached to the classroom. One 33 minute episode, in which five children participated, can be interpreted as generating several different modes of 'play' ranging from excursions into deep fantasy to physical exploratory play. At some points, children referred to adult regulations to direct their activity. There were also extended repetitive and non-verbal interactions – panting, screaming, banging and animal noises. These non-verbal interactions were sometimes incorporated into the development of a slightly amorphous narrative that various children entered or detached themselves from at different points. Intersecting themes that emerged within the narrative included themes of family, being the mummy, being the child, running, being chased, nasty man, monster, dying, killing and being killed. These appeared to be linked in the affective build up and release of tension, sometimes explicitly enacted in panting and screaming. At times roles were explicitly allocated and negotiated, at other times the play seemed to move seamlessly with no obvious planning.

First, then, was a mode of 'play' activity in which children referred to previously prescribed rules and discourses. For example, a child taking the role of mummy addressed her peer as 'darling', in an echo of maternal language. At other points children directly referenced rules set by their teacher either reiterating adult authority – 'Have you heard what Miss said? You're not allowed to climb, are you? You're not allowed to climb' – or subverting it – 'It doesn't matter, she's not even

out here, she's not even out here'. It is possible to speculate about the repetition of phrases within both these extracts, which might signify the fixing of discourse, or, alternatively, its subversion as the rhythm of the chanting displaces the more fixed, verbal meaning of the words. The exchange over tree climbing can be interpreted as a struggle over 'play' – either staying within regulative norms of hierarchical authority or moving into more illegitimate modes of activity. The recontextualised rules, coming from the child as opposed to the teacher, carry a different force and can be challenged in a way that they might not be when spoken from the position of institutionalised authority.

At times the repetitive, non-verbal element of the children's activity became more central. During the recorded 33 minute episode, children were engaged in banging objects for a period of approximately seven minutes. One child chanted 'Make some noise! Make some noise! Make some noise', at the same time as repeatedly hitting some metal railings, encouraging other children to join in. Non-verbal activity also seemed to be associated with dangerous moments in the narrative. The fieldnotes record: 'The girls scream excitedly, and one declares: "He's gonna get us! Shut the window!" More excited screams'. Similarly, danger and death in the narrative are accompanied by non-verbal articulation: '"No! He died me!" "He got me! He got me as well!" A girl shouts in a mournful way: "Nooo! Nooo!" She starts panting heavily' (Fieldnote).

If we think of this in terms of Bernstein's theorisation of meanings in a direct relation with a material base as the site of the yet to be thought, in contrast to 'the meanings which create and unite two worlds' (p. 30), we can understand the liminal and non-verbal aspects of children's activity as that which keeps them outside the regulated and wordy world of early years pedagogy. It is not the case that danger and death are completely excluded from the classroom, but the more embodied responses, screaming and panting, constitute an unmanageable excess in terms of the curriculum, and in relation to pedagogic theorisations of learning and development.

5. CONCLUSIONS: PLAYING IN THE DISCURSIVE GAP

A key question underlying our analysis in this paper is: why does the signifier 'play' seem to act as such a key site for the construction and differentiation of pedagogic identities? Bernstein's (1975) suggestion that 'play' can be interpreted as an exteriorisation of something within the child that can then be named by the teacher in terms of cognitive development is one way of answering this question. It helps us to understand why 'play' was so central in the recontextualisation of theories of learning into progressive classroom pedagogies, which require the teacher to find ways to identify and evaluate learning without appearing to direct the evaluated activities. This is achieved through the identification of 'play' and 'learning', so that in the process of evaluation, 'play' is interpreted as something other than itself. However, this explanation does not seem quite so adequate as the progressive discourses in the field of education are subsumed within discourses of standards and accountability. We might expect 'play' to disappear as a key signifier when progressive discourses relating to child-centred

learning no longer hold sway. Yet the commitment to the signifier 'play', connoting various different activities as essential to children's development, has remained central to discourses of pedagogic policy and practice for the early years, suggesting further possible explanations may need to be sought to account for its hold across the diverse pedagogic identities instantiated in the official and pedagogic recontextualising fields.

Bernstein's conceptualisation of the *pedagogic schizoid position* has helped us to foreground the way pedagogic identities are constructed through complex and contradictory identifications with the conflicting values of the market and of idealised narratives of child development and self expression. It reminds us of the psychoanalytic insight that we use our fantasised relation to these external objects to cover over intense feelings of anxiety and formlessness: this excess of affect is kept at bay through our construction of recognisable social identities. Throughout our analysis we have suggested ways in which discourses of 'play' in early years policy and curricula might be interpreted as an ambivalent response to ambiguous and threatening associations that 'play' carries with it. Pedagogies of play can, paradoxically, be understood as an attempt to tame the potentially incoherent, disordered and disruptive aspects of children's activity. Thus it is possible to argue that the articulations of pedagogies of play in policy documents, in teachers' accounts and professional practice, and in children's self regulated activity, sustain an illusion of coherence, order and control.

We have also suggested a relation between the unnamed, unseen aspects of children's activity and Bernstein's conceptualisation of the discursive gap as the site of infinite potential substitutions, disruptive alternative realisations of the existing pedagogic order. The identities established in the regulative frameworks of the official and pedagogic recontextualising fields are threatened by the excessive, embodied, wordless materialisations that are also inevitably connoted when we talk about 'play'. There is thus a clear connection between Bernstein's theorisation of the discursive gap and his account of the pedagogic schizoid position, which enables individual and institutional pedagogic identities to defend against the *yet to be thought* in our attempts to support children's entry into the highly regulated discourses of the social world. As he also suggests, though, the pedagogic schizoid position is only one specific contemporary realisation of these defences. The ongoing contestation over actual and potential realisations of 'play' within early years education suggests that the organisation of constitutive elements of pedagogies of play will continue to shift, framed by the also shifting relations between the official and pedagogic fields, and by the relation of these to wider economic and political forces.

7. NOTES

1   It is worth noting that Bernstein's next sentence is: 'It is not a dislocation of meaning, it is a gap' – which seems to be a fairly explicit attempt to distance his conceptualisation from that of Derrida or Laclau – or which suggests that this relation had perhaps been pointed out to him. His denial of this relation does not mean that the resonance between his ideas and these other theorists is not worth exploring.

2   Economic and Social Research Council, UK R000-22-3885, *Role Play in the Reception Class: A Study of Pupil and Teacher Perspectives,* Sue Rogers (PI) and Peter Woods.

3   Economic and Social Research Council, UK R000-22-3065, *Opportunities Afforded by the Outdoors for Alternative Pedagogies as Children Move from Foundation Stage to Year 1,* Sue Waite (PI), Julie Evans and Sue Rogers.

4   Further analysis of the modes in which children rearticulate these rules might produce a more precise account of children's influence on specific realisations of pedagogic discourse, or, as Ivinson and Duveen (2005) have put it: 'the processes through which children themselves come to be in a position to frame and organise their knowledge in a way that makes it acceptable and recognisable by the institution'. They argue that 'children develop a representation of the curriculum through which their experience of schooling is mediated and which furnishes them with the resources they need to frame and organise their knowledge' (Ivinson and Duveen, 2005, pp. 627–628).

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