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Observation Report Kristin Alt

Recess at Woodward Elementary School

For the past eight weeks I have volunteered at Woodward Elementary as a playground assistant for an hour and a half each week as a partial requirement for Dr. Tan's Social Development class. Recess at Woodward lasts for thirty minutes, which provided me the opportunity to observe three recesses a day. The children in the first recess (11:25-11:50) were from a first/second grade class and a third/fourth grade class. These children were all between the ages of six to ten years. The second recess (11:55-12:20) was composed of a third grade class and a third/fourth grade class. The children were eight to ten years old. The children in the third recess (12:25-12:50) were from three different kindergarten classes. Their ages ranged from four to six years.

During my time at Woodward, I have had the opportunity to get to know several of the children while gaining a better understanding of the dynamics of the playground. The community and students from Kalamazoo College built the playground. The structures and environment allow for several types of play and is equipped to handle both younger and older children. The ways in which the playground facilitated play will be addressed in greater detail in the first observation.

Aside from introducing me to the children and culture of Woodward, serving as a playground assistant allowed me the chance to observe first hand the behaviors and interactions that we discussed in our Social Development class. Following is a series of

five observations from the playground and an explanation of how each related to some of the topics, themes, and theories that covered in our class. These observations by no means cover all the topics that we discussed, but instead are intended to provide an explanation for some of the behaviors that occurred at Woodward Elementary School.

Castles, Trenches, and Treasures – Children’s Play

Date: 5.14.2003

Time: 11:25-11:50

Setting: playground with two classes: 1st/2nd grade and 3rd/4th grade

Activities: children playing on the monkey bars and in the sand

This observation began with three second grade boys who were hanging from the bars and swinging back and forth. One of them accidentally got knocked down and hit his head when he fell. I went over to make sure he was ok. He cried for a minute or so with his face towards the ground. The other two boys came over to where he was, sat down, and rubbed his head. The boy who was hurt pushed his friends away and kept crying, softer now. He also began to sift sand through his hands. His friends seemed to also notice this and they began to talk about how you could make sandcastles with the dry sand. One of the boys explained that all you had to do was push sand together to make a mountain of sand. Immediately, the crying subsided, and the three boys began making mountains of sand.

At first, the boys were all in the same vicinity, playing with the same materials (sand), but were doing so independently. Two of the boys were making mountains out of the sand, and the other was digging a trench. Each of the boys seemed aware of what the others were doing, which can be seen in the way they incorporated each other’s ideas into their own castle. For example, one of the mountain builders took note of the trench that was being built and quickly began to dig one around his mountain. The trench digger stopped digging and asked me if I wanted to dig because he could not do it anymore. I mentioned that maybe using the stick that was by his foot might make it easier for him to dig. He grabbed the twig and went back to his digging. After the other two boys saw his new method was successful, they ran off and returned with digging “tools” of their own. One had found a short wide stick and the other an old sunglass lens. They dug for a while longer.

Suddenly, one of the boys shouted, “Hey, I know where a hole is already started, let’s go dig there!” The other two got up and ran after the first child to a spot under the slide where there was a small preexisting hole. They all got down on their knees around the whole and used their various digging instruments to deepen the hole. In addition to their cooperative goal, digging a hole, they also began to make suggestions of what they would do once they had the hole. One child had the idea to burry a stick that was lying nearby in the hole, and one of the other boys added that when they were done they should also burry the objects that they were using to dig with. However, the bell signaling the end of recess rang before they were able to complete all of this.

The literature regarding play provides a theoretical explanation for many of the behaviors seen in this observation. Specifically, the research on different types of play and the role of the play environment relate to behavior exhibited by these three boys. In regards to play, Parten proposed various social levels of play that include: unoccupied play, solitary play, onlooker play, parallel play, associative play, and cooperative play. These forms or levels of play are not developmentally based, and therefore, each can occur at any time in any particular order (as cited in Siefert, Hoffnung, & Hoffnung, 1997). Solitary play occurs when a child plays alone, onlooker play takes place when a child watches others play, parallel play is when children play with the same materials in a similar manner with little or no contact with the other children, associative play is based on a common activity where the children talk but do not assign roles, and cooperative play occurs when children form groups, organize, direct, and assume roles (Siefert et al., 1997). In this example, both parallel play and cooperative play can be seen. When the boys first start playing in the sand, and each child is creating their own mountain, castle, or trench. Although they are using the same materials and working in the same vicinity, their play is independent from each other. However, the play merges when they go to work on the preexisting hole. Suddenly, they are an organized team working together with a common goal: digging a hole.

As mentioned earlier, play can also be viewed from a developmental viewpoint. Siefert et al. described four cognitive levels of play: 1) functional play, which involves simple, repeated movements such as splashing or digging; 2) constructive play, which involves manipulation of physical objects in order to build or construct something; 3) pretend play, which is mediated by fantasy; and 4) games with rules, which becomes

common around age five or six years during the Concrete Operational period (Siefert et al., 1997). This observation demonstrates both functional and constructive play. When the boy first fell off the structure and was sitting in the sand crying, he began to sift the sand through his hands. There was no apparent goal other than to feel the sand go through his fingers. The majority of toddlers' play is functional, and by the time children reach early elementary school, functional play decreases to less than one-quarter of total playtime (Siefert et al., 1997). In the current example, the boy's time spent in functional play was extremely brief, which is consistent with the previous findings. From the functional play of the injured child, they play evolved to constructive play in which the boys were using sand and found objects to create and build mountains, trenches, and holes. According for play to be classified as constructive rather than functional, a goal needs to be evident. In this example, building mountains and digging trenches provides evidence that the boys had a goal to their behavior rather than simply playing with the sand solely for enjoyment.

The organization, structure, and environment of the Woodward playground facilitated the boys' play through linkages, flexibility, and materials. Creating links between playground structures such as slides, rope ladders, tire swings, etc, has been shown to have positive benefits. Linkages increase the overall complexity of the playground, which helps maintain the interest and attention of children (Wardle as cited in Johnson & Yawkey, 1999). Linkages also encourage continuous movement between various activities children (Wardle as cited in Johnson & Yawkey, 1999). The fluidity of play that linkages create could be seen in this example. When the boy fell of the play structure, he landed in the sand, and as mentioned above began to play with the sand. His

interest in the sand spread to the other members of the group and they too moved quickly and easily from playing on the structure to playing with the sand. The preexisting hole that the boys later moved to was also located in close proximity to two other play structures, suggesting that the initial hole was created in that location as a result of linkages between structures.

The flexibility of playground equipment, which refers to the extent that the playground materials can be manipulated and used in a variety of play, is another important component of play environments (Wardle as cited in Johnson & Yawkey, 1999). The sand at the Woodward playground is an example of a material that is highly flexible. As seen in this observation, the boys used the sand to build castles, mountains, and dig trenches. In addition, found objects, such as the sticks, were later combined with the sand to dig a hole to bury treasures. Because sand is such an open-ended material, they boys could have created an infinite number of storylines or activities with it.

The materials and structure of the playground also encourages certain types of play. As mentioned above, the boys were engaged in cooperative, constructive play. According to Wardle (as cited in Johnson & Yawkey, 1999), loose objects and natural materials, such as the sand and sticks, facilitate constructive play. The constructive play in this observation consisted of building of mountains/sandcastles and the digging of holes/trenches with sticks, which was facilitated by the loose materials on the Woodward playground. In addition, providing children with a variety of play materials that can be combined and are not limited in function can help foster creativity in children (Tan, personal communications, April 21, 2003). The sand at Woodward is an example of this because the children could use in any plot or storyline that they created.

“I’m the Sweeper” – Roles, Rules, & Entry in Children’s Play

Date: 5.7.2003
Time: 11:25-11:50
Setting: playground with two classes: 1st/2nd grade and 3rd/4th grade
Activities: children playing on the blue slide

The game began with five children in second grade: three girls and two boys. They were all playing on the blue plastic slide that goes down in a wave-like manner. At first, one of the boys said to the group of kids playing on the same structure, “Hey watch this!” He proceeded to go down the slide standing on his feet. However, once he hit the first bump in the slide, he fell back into a seated position. Laughing, the other four children joined right in. They each slide down the slide on the feet, trying not to fall. The other children waited in a line at the top of the slide for their turn to go down.

After each went down the slide a few times standing on their feet, a few of the girls decided to go down the slide as a train. The first girl sat down and waited while the two other girls linked onto her. Then they slid down making train noises and laughing. After doing this, one of the girls sat down and slide one quarter of the way down and stopped when she got to the first bump on the slide. It appeared as if she was waiting for people to link onto her to form another train, but suddenly she changed position. She hung her feet over one side of the slide and her arms went behind her to the other side so she was sitting sideways on the slide.

Almost immediately, the game shifted. The girl who was next in line sat down on the slide with her feet hanging over the same way as the girl who was stopped on the slide. She then slid down and bumped into the girl who was stopped on the slide. Upon impact, she slid a little, but was able to keep her position on the slide. Both girls then stayed there while the next child in line, one of the boys, sat down sideways on the slide and slid into the two girls. The force knocked the first girl down the slide, but leaving the other two children hanging on. Within minutes, rules and roles began to develop. The main objective for the individuals on the slide appeared to be staying on the slide as long as possible with the constant bumping of others coming down the slide. The children who were sliding down the slide one at a time each tried to knock the whole group down. Once they became skilled at this art, it became easier for them to stay on the slide. At one point, four of the five children were on the slide, and the last child in their group, slid down screaming, “I’m the sweeper. Everybody off”. Laughing, they all slide down and ran up the structure where the game started over.

At this point, some other children began to come up to see what was going on. After a moment of passive observation, three other students ran up the structure and got in the line. Without saying anything, they entered the group, abided by the established

“rules” and remained in the group for the rest of recess. On the other hand, another child ran over to the group and tried to join it. However, when his turn came, he slid down the slide forward, feet first, instead of sliding on his side. Several children responded with comments such as, “That’s cheating!” or “You can’t do that!” The newcomer defensively replied, “I just wanted to slide down the slide” and proceeded to leave. After that, several other kids came and joined the group successfully. All of the newcomers came in groups, many of which had been playing a game together. The linkages between the play structures seemed to provide a natural integration of the children’s peer groups during this recess.

This observation provides a great example of the nature of children’s play. Seifert et al. (1997) described the nature of play through six important characteristics. First, play is intrinsically motivated, rather than extrinsically motivated. The children in this observation were engaged in a game for pure enjoyment, not to achieve external goals. Secondly, play is process oriented rather than product oriented. In this observation, the children slid down the slide because the process was enjoyable, not because they simply wanted to get down off the structure. Thirdly, play is creative and non-literal, meaning it is not bound to reality. An example of this could be seen in the early stages of the children’s play when the girls were going down the slide pretending that they were a train. Of course, it is impossible for three small girls to resemble a real train in size features, and real trains would not be going down a slide at a playground. However, because play does not abide by the same rules as reality does, these children were able to act like they were a train. Fourthly, play is governed by explicit rules. According to Seifert et al. (1997), the rules can be seen by observing the game, but are not always clearly stated. This was the case in this observation. The rules of the game could be inferred by simply by watching the group play. Throughout the game, the rules were never verbally stated by any of the children. In fact, the only time they were even alluded to was when an infraction occurred. The fifth characteristic of play is that it is

spontaneous and self-initiated. This is exemplified when the children initiate the game on their own, without any prompting from other adults or children. The sixth and final characteristic of play is that it is free from major stress and major emotional distress. Due to the easy, relaxed nature of the children's play, it can be inferred that no stressors were interfering with their play since play does not occur under extreme stress, fear, or uncertainty (Seifert et al. 1997).

As mentioned in the previous observation, play can be viewed developmentally. This observation exemplifies the fourth level of play, games with rules. According to Seifert, Hoffnug, & Hoffnug (1997), this level of play emerges around age 5 or 6 during the Concrete Operational period. The rules for the games can come from external sources, such as the rules of checkers, or internally from the children themselves as was the case in this observation. As the play developed throughout recess, unspoken norms and rules seemed to emerge, a phenomenon that has been supported through research. For example, Seifert et al. (1997) found that rules of a game often develop from the children's made-up rules. In this observation, the children made up the rules for their game on the slide, and when a child deviated from the rules, the other children responded by calling the non-conforming child a cheater and saying "you can't do that".

According to Parton's social levels of play, which are not developmentally based, these children were engaged in cooperative play. Cooperative play occurs when children come together to form organized groups in which members assume roles (Seifert et al. 1997). In this example, the group of kids appeared to form around a shared interest – playing on the slide. Once their group was established, they began to assume roles based on the game that they initiated. The most obvious example of a child assuming a role

occurred when everyone but one child was on the slide. That boy then yelled, “I am the sweeper! Everybody off”. He established and fulfilled this role in order to maintain the flow of the game. The rest of the group readily accepted his role, which was shown by them sliding down the slide like he had asked them to do.

Entry behaviors are also evident in this observation. Entry behaviors are defined as any activity or strategy used to enter a group that is already formed or in progress (Putallaz & Wasserman 1990). In this example, both effective and ineffective entry strategies were employed. The boy who jumped into the game with little observation and then attempted to participate in a way that was contrary to the groups established method of going down the slide displays an ineffective disruptive strategy. A child that comes into an interested, engaged group and tries to change the entire flow or activity of that group demonstrates the disruptive strategy of entry behavior (Tan, personal communications, April 11, 2003). In this observation, before the child attempted entry, the group was deeply engaged in their game. The children were laughing, talking, were all were actively involved and they all seemed quite interested in their game. He disrupted the flow of the group’s game when he slid down the slide feet first, and such a disruption can lead to entry failure. As noted by Putallaz & Wasserman (1990), one of the critical components of successful entry into a group is the newcomer’s understanding of the group’s frame of reference. In this case, the newcomer was either ignoring or ignorant to the fact that everyone else was going down the slide sideways with his or her feet hanging off the side.

Competent entry strategy was also shown during this observation. Competent strategy often involves a combination of observing with the intent to learn about the

group as well as finding an active manner in which to enter the group (Tan, personal communications, April 11, 2003). The children who successfully entered the group first observed with the goal to learn about the group and the game in order that they may understand the flow. Based on this knowledge, they found a way in which they could effectively join the group without disturbing the flow of the game. In this example, the newcomers just got in line behind the children who were already playing and waited for their turn to go down the slide. In addition, when they went down, they used their knowledge gained from the observation to abide by the pre-established rules. The clear structure and rules of this game made entry easier.

“They won’t let me play” – Entry Behavior, Theory of Mind, and Altruism

Date: 5.28.2003
Time: 11:25-11:50
Setting: playground with two classes: 1st/2nd grade and 3rd/4th grade
Activities: children playing on the tire swings

A first grade girl came up to me crying. “They won’t let me push,” she cried as she pointed towards the tire swings. She grabbed my hand and pulled me in that direction. A group of about five or six girls was sitting on the tire swing and a girl who looked older and bigger than the others was pushing them. They were all laughing and appeared to be having fun. They had been playing on the swings since they beginning of recess. I asked the upset child to explain what happened and she just kept crying and repeating, “They won’t let me push”. I pointed out that there was already a girl who was pushing and that could have been the reason they told her she could not push. She shook her head and said, “No, they just don’t want me to push”. She tried to pull me closer to the tire swings so I could tell the other girls to let her push, but instead I asked her if she asked the girls if she could be the next pusher. She had not, but gripped my hand more tightly pulled me closer to the tire swings.

As we approached the group of girls, the older girl who had been pushing came up to me and asked me what was that matter with the girl who was crying. I prompted the younger girl to explain why she was upset, but again, she did not respond. The older girl looked at me and said, “She’s crying because we didn’t let her push”. Then, the older girl reached down and took the upset girl’s hand and led her over to the group on the tire swings. She said something to the girls on the swing and then the younger girl got to push all of them. She played with that group on the swings for the rest of the recess.

Entry behavior was seen in this observation. As mentioned, entry behavior involves any as any activity or strategy used to enter a group that is already formed or in progress (Putallaz & Wasserman 1990). One of the entry strategies that this young girl employed was borrowed authority, which is described as using somebody else’s authority to enter a group (Tan, personal communications, April 11, 2003). In this case, the younger girl tried to use my role as a playground assistant to help her gain entry into the group. She must have assumed that because I was in a position of authority that the other

girls would not deny her request for entry into their group if I told them that they had to include her. Unfortunately such a strategy is used often at Woodward. During the past few weeks, I have noticed that many of the lunch moms that stay for recess often “rescue” the child by requiring that pre-existing groups allow him or her to play. Although it may seem like a quick fix to the problem at hand, in the long run rescuing the children could have extremely negative consequences. For example, if a child relies on someone else to gain entry into a group, that child will never learn the valuable and necessary skills of entry behavior. Therefore, when adults or older peers are not available to assist this child, her own skills will be insufficient. Furthermore, entry behavior becomes increasingly difficult with age because verbal and nonverbal cues become more covert (Tan, personal communications, April 14, 2003).

Because the older child was helping her, the younger girl missed out on the opportunity to interact in a horizontal relationship. Horizontal relationships are relationships composed of two or more individuals of the same age and status; and allow children to gain invaluable practice at assertiveness, fairness, reciprocity, turn taking, and a variety of other essential social skills. In a horizontal relationship, one must earn his or her place in a group of equals by merit (Tan, personal communications, April 30, 2003). On the other hand, vertical relationships involve individuals who differ in age, power, or status (Tan, personal communications, April 30, 2003). This observation illustrated a vertical relationship since the older girl differed in age and status from the younger one. Because of the vertical nature of their relationship, the younger child did not have the opportunity to engage in reciprocity. Instead, the relationship was unidirectional with the older girl providing the support, structure, and protection and the younger girl accepting

it without giving anything in return. This type of vertical relationship is not as beneficial as horizontal relationships in regard to teaching the younger girl how to effectively interact with her peers.

Theory of Mind (ToM) is also evident in this example. ToM involves understanding mental concepts, and is defined as 1) knowledge about mental concepts, including one's own, and 2) understanding others' mental concepts like perceptions, knowledge, and intentions (Tan, personal communications, May 9, 2003). In this example, the older girl showed evidence of her understanding of ToM. She first inferred that the younger girl was crying because she was upset. Secondly, she inferred that her emotion of being upset was manifested in the action of crying. This reasoning demonstrates that the older child was aware of the causal nature of the situation: the younger girl was crying *because* she was upset, and she was upset *because* she was told that she could not play. According to Lee and Homer (1999), one of the three fundamental assumptions underlying ToM is that individuals must believe there are causal links between a person's mind, their environment, and their actions. The older girl's ability to understand what the younger girl was thinking and feeling as a result of being denied entry into group illustrated that she had an understanding of theory of mind.

The older child's understanding of ToM may have contributed to her altruistic action. Altruism, an aspect of pro-social behavior, is defined as any action that benefits others (Shaffer 2002). Rosenhan proposed two types of altruism: autonomous altruism and normative altruism. Autonomous altruism is prosocial acts motivated by concern for others, whereas normative altruism motivated by expectations of reward or avoiding criticism. The latter type is based off of social norms and is moderated by social learning

(Shaffer 2002). Although it is impossible to accurately interpret this child's underlying motive, I would argue that her altruistic act was more of a normative act rather than autonomous. While it is true she allowed the younger girl to push even though she would not be able to push as high or as fast as the older girl who had been pushing, the girl's altruistic act did not come until she saw the younger girl talking to me. Because she waited to be altruistic until I was around, it seems that her act was done out of expectation of conforming to social norms and avoiding my criticism rather than to simply make the younger girl feel better.

“Now the fort is mine!” – Dodge’s Model and Context

Date: 4.16.2003
Time: 11:55-12:20
Setting: playground with three classes: 3rd/4th grade, Special Ed., and 3rd grade
Activities: children playing on the tire mound and running around the playground

When recess started, he was one of the kids that came charging towards the playground. While others headed towards the swings, the playing field, and the large play structures, this boy went straight for the hanging monkey bars. He pulled himself up on top of the structure where he stayed perched for a few minutes. We went over there to ask if he was allowed to be sitting up there. A girl who was nearby said that it was fine for them to sit up there, and in fact, she was about to sit up there too. As soon as she reached the top, the boy jumped off. There was no verbal exchange between him and the girl.

Nearby, some boys were playing a game on the tire mound. They were all trying to climb to the top while pulling the other boys off. They were all laughing and joking, and the nature of the game did not seem aggressive, or for that matter, even competitive. After a few minutes, that group of boys jumped off the tire mound and headed towards the playing field.

Shortly after they left, the first boy reappeared. He went straight for the tire mound and climbed to the top. He sat down and said; “Now the fort is mine”. After he made sure that we had heard him make his claim to the “fort”, the boy climbed down.

A few minutes later, the group of boys returned to the sandy area of the playground. The group of boys were running around, laughing, and shouting. One of the boys in the group called out to one of his friends in that same group by saying, “You’re a hippie!” The boy responded by saying, “Nobody calls me a hippie”, to which him and all of his friends laughed and continued chasing each other around the playground. Michael was hovering nearby and took note of the exchange. Immediately after he heard all of this, the boy ran up towards the child that had been called a hippie and shouted “Hippie, hippie, hippie” repeatedly. As soon as the group turned to acknowledge what the boy outside their group was saying, he ran away. However, as soon as the group returned to its activities, the boy would run up close enough to shout and call the child a hippie again. This behavior continued for quite some time, however, the interactions between the boy and the group never progressed any farther.

In general, the vibe that this child emitted was a desire for power and control, but the unwillingness to achieve that status through acceptable social interactions with his peers. Instead, he appeared to measure his own ability and status by completing the same tasks and achieving the same level of success that his classmates had without confronting the risks associated with earning that status within the peer group.

The behavior of this child could be explained using Dodge’s Social Information Processing Theory. According to Dodge’s Theory, social interactions are composed of a

series of six steps: 1) Encoding social cues, 2) Interpreting cues, 3) Formulating social goals, 4) Generating problem-solving strategies, 5) Evaluating the effectiveness of strategies and selecting a response, and 6) Enacting a response (Shaffer 2002). The first step involves taking note of verbal and nonverbal cues, which this child seemed to be able to do. During the second step, these cues must be interpreted; and it appears that this child may have interpreted some of the cues inaccurately. For example, when the group of boys was engaged in their game on the tire mound, he interpreted it as a competition that determined one's social status. However, as mentioned in the description, the behavior of the group was in no way competitive. Their game revolved more around the process rather than the product, which is a characteristic of play (Steifert et al. 1997). The third step of Dodge's Model looks at the goals behind behavior. In this case, the child's goal appeared to be to increase his social standing rather than gain entry into the group. This can be inferred because he had several opportunities to engage in entry behavior, but instead he chose to wait until the group left the tire mound and then outdo them. This child may have also had difficulty with the fourth step of Dodge's Model, which involves generating problem-solving strategies. If this child's goal was to increase his social standing, his solutions should have involved the peer group. Because this boy engaged in behaviors that the group did not notice, such as climbing to the top of the tire mound after they had left, it would be nearly impossible for the boy to increase in social status within in the group since they were largely unaware of his actions. Similarly, this child potentially had problems with step five of Dodge's Model. This child apparently believed that his behavior would help him accomplish his goal, which explains why he chose to act the way he did. However, as explained, his behavior seemed to be

counterproductive: instead of rising in status, when he did interact with the group he came across more of an annoyance rather than a child with something valuable to offer to the group. Therefore, this child's idea of what would be effective in achieving his goals seems to be slightly skewed. The final step of Dodge's Model involves enacting a response, and this child did not have any difficulty with that. Although it is not clear exactly what caused the behavior described above, Dodge's Model identifies numerous areas that may have posed a problem to this child and lead to his decisions and actions.

Behavior does not occur in a vacuum, so it is also necessary to note that this child's responses were influenced by a variety of other factors including context, past experiences, as well as personality characteristics. Context is a broad term that encompasses a variety components including the type of relationship, the situation, the setting, and time (Tan, personal communications, April 4, 2003).

Thelen discusses the importance of context in her article about babies' stepping reflex. When very young babies are held vertically with their feet on a flat surface, they will move their legs in an alternate pattern that resembles walking (1996). Infants were thought to lose this stepping reflex after a month or two following birth. However, Thelen found that during the time when this reflex disappears, infants are also gaining a lot of weight, weight that cannot yet be supported by their muscles. To test her hypothesis, she placed babies in water in order to lighten the weight on their legs, and by doing so found that the infants still performed the stepping reflex when the weight of their legs was not an issue. To Thelen, this highlighted the importance of baby-in-context (1996).

In a similar fashion, the behavior that this child exhibited was a result of the entire context, ranging from his past experiences, personality characteristics, temperament, time, the environment at Woodward, and the behavior of those around him. For example, the importance of time can be seen in this observation. If the child had entered the group of boys while they were still engaged in their game on the tire mound, his behavior would have been more socially acceptable. Past experiences are also important. Dodge recognized this when he stated that all aspects of his model are influenced by previous experiences, expectations, and knowledge of social rules and norms (Tan, personal communications, April 4, 2003).

Another manner in which this context could be seen is regards to Bandura's idea of reciprocal determination. According to his theory, the behaviors and characteristics of an individual influence the selections in any social environment, and these selections in turn influence the behavior and consequences of certain behavior of that individual (Tan, personal communications, April 16, 2003). Therefore, each child on the playground is exposed to a unique environment depending on the attributes of each child and the characteristics of the children that they attract or repel.

By looking at all these components, it is easy to see how they have the potential to interact and influence behavior. However, due to the fact that I have only known this child for a short period of time and only in the particular context of the Woodward playground, I cannot make any conclusions regarding how these various components interacted and resulted in his behavior described above. Instead, I can only conclude that his behavior was influenced by a variety of components that extended far beyond the scope of the playground that day.

The Slide Game Revisited – Children’s Play in a Developmental Context

Date: 5.28.2003
Time: 11:55-12:20
Setting: playground with three classes: 3rd/4th grade, Special Ed., and 3rd grade
Activities: children playing on the blue wavy slide

During the third and fourth grade recess, a group of about ten children, both males and females, ran over to the blue wavy slide. Immediately, they began to play the same game that we had early observed the second graders playing where all the children line up at the top of the slide and take turns going down the slide sideways. The individual(s) on the slide attempt to hang on in order to avoid being bumped off by the person who slides down the slide and tries to knock everyone else down.

This game was initiated wordlessly, and almost immediately. None of the older children seemed to feel the need to verbalize any rules or aspects of the game. The older children seemed to organize themselves much more effectively. When they went down the slide they did so in an alternating pattern: one child would go down with their feet hanging over the right side, the next child would go down with their feet hanging over the left side, and they continued in such a manner all the way down the line. In addition, they appeared able to line a larger number of children up on the slide before anyone got knocked off. At one point in this game, there were eight children on the slide before they started to get knocked down.

The roles in the older children’s game also appeared to be expressed non-verbally. For example, when too many children were able to line up on the slide, nobody had to verbalize the problem or assign himself or herself a role such as “the sweeper”. Instead, when the slide was full, they all slid down laughing and started the game up again with a new individual sliding down first.

However, this game did not last long because, much to our dismay, another individual on playground duty came over to the group on the slide and told them if they could not play on the equipment correctly, then they could not play on it at all. Without argument, the children all slid down, and the game ended.

Because a similar game was observed during the second grade recess, this observation demonstrates some of the important aspects of play that differ according to the age and development of the children involved.

The manner in which children play changes over the course of their development. For example, Piaget found that the way children engage in games with rules changes over time. Younger children are more likely to negotiate roles and behaviors as they go along,

whereas older children are more likely to agree on the rules and standards for the game before they begin and stick to those pre-established rules throughout the game (as cited in Seifert et al. 1997). This phenomenon can be observed in the two examples of this game. In the game that the younger children played, the rules and roles emerged over time. It started with the children going down the slide as a train and evolved into a game with rules. However, it was clear that the rules were not established ahead of time. This was seen when one of the children went down the slide feet first and several children stopped playing the game momentarily and yelled, “Hey, that’s cheating” or “You can’t do that”. The opposite was seen during the older children’s game. The rules were clearly established before the children started playing the game, and most likely before they even headed out to recess since they started playing immediately. It is possible that they had played this game earlier that week, but the important factor to note is that they did not deviate from or argue about the rules that they had set in place. All of the children who were playing the game played in a similar fashion, demonstrating that they all had a clear understanding of their role and the rules of the game.

Metacommunication is another way that play changes depending on the ages of the children involved. In the most general form, metacommunication involves an awareness and ability to communicate with others. This is seen in play through negotiation and co-creation of storylines, plots, or rules (Tan, personal communications, May 16, 2003). Older children make more explicit guidelines and plans for their play so there is less room for confusion (Tan, personal communications, May 16, 2003). The explicit planning was seen when the children ran out to the slide and immediately began playing the game. The game was so well planned out that there was no need to verbalize

the rules or prepare to play it. The clear guidelines they had established before they began to play allowed them to engage in the game without having to worry about how they were going to do so. On the other hand, when the younger children were playing this same game, it was obvious that they did not have a set of rules that were dictating their behavior. Instead, the rules were created as they went along, making it more difficult to know exactly what was not allowed.

Another possible explanation for the difference in the games between the older and younger children could potentially be linked to the children's social competence. Seifert et al. (1997) found that the more time children engage in complex forms of play, the greater level of social competence they will have with their peers. Because the third and fourth graders have had more opportunities to take part in complex play, their play is likely to be mediated by increased social competence.

What level are you on? – Evaluating the time at Woodward

Woodward Elementary School often asks its students to evaluate their own behavior based on a standardized letter scale called WSTaR Levels of Behaviors. On this scale, A stands for anarchy, and is the lowest level; B stands for bothering; C is for cooperation; and D, the highest level, stands for democracy (Alexander, personal communications, April 9, 2003). Students are expected to strive for and maintain the C or D level of behavior. By asking children what level they are on, it requires them to attend to their own behavior and the implications it may have on others. The goal is to foster independence in the students so they will be competent to monitor their own behavior and make the necessary adjustments.

In a similar fashion, completing this observation report has challenged me to focus on the framework and knowledge that we developed throughout this class in order to become an independent thinker. By incorporating the real life Woodward experience into this course, I have been able to gain a more complete understanding of how individuals develop in a social context and how my behaviors can impact the system as a whole.

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