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Author

Dunn, Julie

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The imagination at work within the dramatic play of pre-adolescent girls

by

Julie Dunn

(Australia)

Abstract

Preadolescent children are capable of developing complex, collaborative dramatic play ‘texts’, while also being able to reflect upon and describe their ‘inner experiences’ during this play. These reflections have the potential to provide useful insights into the operation of the imagination during play. This paper describes the findings relating to the imagination that emerged from a qualitative research project conducted to examine the dramatic play of one group of preadolescent girls. Using video recordings of their play sessions and player interviews as the primary data sources, this paper outlines findings around three key areas: what drove the players to play; what topics/contexts they played out; and most importantly, what they ‘saw’ as they played. It suggests that these girls played to generate experiences that felt ‘real’, that their play texts predominantly focused on dangerous and supernatural situations, and that the visualisations generated by their imaginations during play were influenced by a range of contextual and personal engagement factors.

Abrégé

Les enfants préadolescents sont capables de développer des ‘textes’ théâtraux complexes et en collaboration, tout en étant aussi capables de réfléchir à propos de et de décrire leurs ‘expériences intimes’ pendant cette pièce. Ces réflexions ont le potentiel de fournir des aperçus utiles sur le fonctionnement de l’imagination pendant la pièce. Cet article décrit les résultats se rapportant à l’imagination qui ont émergé d’un projet de recherche qualitatif conduit pour examiner le jeu théâtral d’un groupe de filles préadolescentes. Utilisant des enregistrements vidéo de leurs sessions théâtrales et des entretiens avec les jeunes interprètes comme principales sources primaires, cet article délimite les résultats autour de trois domaines clés: ce qui a poussé les interprètes à jouer, les sujets/contextes qu’elles ont interprétés, et le plus important, ce qu’elles ont ‘vu’ alors qu’elles étaient en scène. Il suggère que ces filles étaient en scène pour générer des expériences qui semblent ‘réelles’, que les textes de leurs pièces se concentraient principalement sur des situations dangereuses et surnaturelles, et que les visualisations générées par leurs imaginations en scène étaient influencées par une série de facteurs d’engagement contextuels et personnels.

Sumario

Los niños preadolescentes son capaces de desarrollar ‘textos’ teatrales complejos y cooperativos, y conjuntamente pueden reflexionar y describir sus ‘experiencias más profundas’ en su desempeño teatral. Estas reflexiones tienen el potencial de suministrar ideas valiosas en la operatividad de la imaginación durante el transcurso de la obra. Este artículo describe los hallazgos relacionados a la imaginación que emergieron de un proyecto de investigación cualitativa llevado a cabo para examinar una obra teatral de un grupo de chicas preadolescentes. Usando video grabaciones de las sesiones y asimismo entrevistas con los interpretes como fuente

primaria de datos, este artículo enfatiza los hallazgos alrededor de tres áreas primordiales: ¿Qué motivó a los intérpretes desempeñarse en la obra?; ¿Qué tópicos o contextos de actuación se eligieron?; y lo más importante, ¿Qué ‘vieron’ a lo largo de su actuación teatral? El artículo también sugiere que estas chicas actuaron para generar sensaciones de tipo real, y que sus textos de actuación enfatizaron predominantemente situaciones de peligro y argumentos sobrenaturales, donde las visualizaciones generadas por la imaginación durante la obra fueron influenciadas por una gama de factores contextuales y personales de interactividad.

Author’s biography

Dr Julie Dunn is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.

j.dunn@griffith.edu.au

Introduction

Dramatic play in young children has been examined in detail, but far less research has been conducted on play in preadolescence. This is partially because the dramatic play of eleven- and twelve-year-olds is quite difficult to access, as it is usually hidden from the gaze of adults. Yet these older children are more able than their younger counterparts to thoughtfully reflect upon and share insights into their experiences — insights which have the potential to teach us much about the operation of the imagination. This paper is aimed at addressing this gap in the literature and focuses on exploring the ‘inner experience’ of dramatic play in older children. Reporting on a research project that involved more than 30 players and covered a two-year period, this paper specifically examines the forces that drove the play, the topics and contexts for play explored. Perhaps most significantly, in terms of the imagination, it also reports from the children’s perspective what they ‘saw’ as they played. Inherent within this final aspect are the factors which impacted on the generation of visualisations within play, including those relating to the individual and those influenced by other group members.

The participants within this research were students of one all-girls school, and together they engaged in play sessions across a two-year period, with the first set of sessions occurring when the girls were eleven years of age and the second when they were twelve. The research site, a suburban Brisbane college, attracts a middle-class and somewhat conservative clientele, with the majority of the students being of Anglo-Saxon heritage. The college also attracts a significant number of girls of Asian descent, but of the 30 girls who volunteered to be a part of this project, only two were from this ethnic background.

The decision to focus the project within this particular all-girls context was based upon the findings from an earlier study (Dunn 1996) that had been conducted within a co-educational government school attracting a similar clientele. That research, which focused on the play preferences of primary school children, had determined that dramatic play in preadolescence persists for longer and is more sophisticated in style for girls than boys, while also determining that older female players from this particular socio-economic grouping have a strong preference for play partners of their own gender. It was therefore decided that an all-girls school would be the most advantageous context for achieving play that was satisfying enough for the imagination to be strongly engaged.

This earlier study had also identified a number of conditions needed to support the play of older children, including time to establish the context and play within it, privacy from the gaze of non-players, the availability of open-ended prop and costume items, willing co-players, and the support of an adult. With these criteria in mind, an after-school club was established and volunteers were sought. The response was greater than expected, with three groups of ten players being formed in the first stage and two in the second. As a result, more than 30 hours of spontaneously generated preadolescent play texts were created and available for analysis.

These texts are, of course, highly specific and unique to this particular group of girls, their socio-cultural milieu and the conditions inherent within the research structure. For this reason, the ability to generalise from these data is limited, but the texts themselves are nonetheless real, having been created by the players for their own enjoyment, with little interest in the research outcomes shown by the girls. In addition, the high level of consistency noted in the texts across the five independent groups and two stages of the research suggests that the play recorded and analysed here was authentic for these players within this context.

This paper begins with a brief examination of the methodology adopted, and then moves on to explore why the girls chose to participate in these play sessions, what they played and, most significantly, what interviews with the girls revealed about their 'inner experience' of this play.

Methodology

This research project can best be described as a longitudinal case study, with the data collection process including interviews with individuals and groups, researcher journal entries and video recordings of each of the 90-minute sessions. A number of interviews at the conclusion of stage two also made use of video-stimulated recall (Bishop 2005; Lyle 2003) and are particularly significant for this discussion. Here the players were given the opportunity to view sections of the recorded play session video and asked to respond to what they saw. Offering a link between the outer and inner experience of play, these final interviews were a rich source of data, providing key insights relevant to this discussion. This experience of viewing the play as captured by the camera gave the girls the chance to 'see' their play sessions in a way that proved to be in strong contrast to the 'view' that their imaginations had served up to them. The comments and reflections generated as a result of this process offer a unique window into their 'inner' experiences.

Analysis of the data was also conducted over two stages, with preliminary categories and concepts being developed after stage one, then modified, refined and extended at the conclusion of the second stage. Of course, given the make-up of the participant group, gender was one of the key factors that shaped the texts, and obviously provides a key framework for analysis. However, given the limitations of this paper, a full discussion of gender has not been attempted here, with the focus remaining instead on the imagination.

Why did they play? The drive towards 'realness'

Analysis of interview data taken from both stages of the research suggests that the driving force behind the involvement of most of the players was the desire to have fun, and that this fun was linked directly to the idea that these sessions gave the girls the chance to be involved in experiences that they would not be able to have in their everyday lives. Significantly, however, these texts had to feel 'real' – meaning that the participants wanted their play experiences to feel like they were happening to them in the 'actual' world rather than the 'dramatic' one. To achieve

this result, the girls worked collaboratively and spontaneously, applying a range of strategies to limit overt acknowledgment of the fact that they were indeed only playing.

By operating in this manner, the girls were engaging in a process of framing (Bateson 1976; Goffman 1974; O'Toole 1992), with the frames that separate the dramatic world from the actual one being hidden — or at least temporarily concealed — through the structures employed within the play itself. The most important of these structures was the limited use the players made of explicit negotiation, choosing instead to apply more implicit signalling systems. These implicit signals allowed the play texts to flow in a more realistic manner, emerging spontaneously without stoppages.

By operating in this way, these girls were inadvertently adhering to one of the unwritten rules of play — a rule which Giffin (1984) has referred to as the 'illusion conservation rule'. This suggests (1984: 88) that 'when constructing make-believe play, players should negotiate transformations with the least possible acknowledgement of the play frame'. This is similar in meaning to the more common dramatic notion of the 'willing suspension of disbelief' (Coleridge, cited in O'Toole 1992: 13). Participants in play must, according to Cockett (1998: 36), 'create a realm of illusion that they know is not real in order to play a game of accepting that, for the time being, the illusion is real'.

O'Neill (1995) believes that all forms of dramatic activity depend on the temporary acceptance of an illusion, while Goffman (1974) has described this as a 'conspiracy'. He refers to audience members in the theatre as 'collaborators in unreality', and suggests that they actively engage in a process of 'playful unknowingness' (1974: 135). In order to 'conserve the illusion' within dramatic play, however, players must not only become collaborators in an unreality created for them, they must simultaneously create it. By adopting the concurrent roles of actor, playwright and audience, participants in play must simultaneously create *and* conserve the illusion of their dramatic worlds — at times so strongly that they 'almost' lose contact with the actual one. Tanya, one of the participants, explains this 'almost' state very well when she says in her interview, 'sometimes I'd kind of get so lost in it [the play text] that it would feel real, but I'd still know ...'

Other players offered different insights into this concept of realness and the driving forces of their play with freedom and a sense of being 'other' also considered important:

GEORGIA: It was fun and it was serious ... well sometimes and it was energising.

TANYA: I enjoyed how we could make things up out of thin air and treat them as though they were real. We had fun.

ANGELA: ... because we weren't ourselves, we were other people and that was fun.

JESSICA: well, because you could pretend to be something like, that you weren't, like you could be anyone you wanted ...

HELEN: Cause I was with my friends and I got to do a lot of things that my mother wouldn't normally let me do ... like screaming and catching people and scaring people and all those other things.

SARAH: I enjoyed feeling scared, pretend scared, but still scared ... you know ...

It seems, then, that as they played the girls were exploring differing levels of aesthetic distancing. Schonmann (2002) has recently explored the application of this notion within the context of

dramatic play, referring to it as the space between imagination and reality. In her work, she has contrasted the experiences of the child as actor within play with those of the child as spectator within theatre, suggesting that younger children often have difficulty achieving an optimal level of aesthetic distance when they are spectators within dramatic events. Here though, as these older girls simultaneously engaged within the evolving texts as both playwrights of their own contributions and spectators of a text being spontaneously developed by and with others, it seems that the participants may also have been ‘playing’ with aesthetic distance. Their comments suggest that their desire was to reduce this distance at times in order to achieve ‘real’ experiences, and later in this paper the idea of shared and private dramatic worlds will be introduced to further this discussion. Of course, the presence of the video camera and its role as an additional ‘audience’ to these texts is also significant here, but a full discussion of this aspect is beyond the scope of this paper.

What did they play? An attraction for violence and the supernatural

Blatner and Blatner (1997: 66), suggest that play provides a context in which generally unacceptable social behaviours are tolerated and that ‘being silly, crude, seductive, babyish, bossy, mocking of authorities, going beyond the bounds of propriety — are all common behaviours in the course of sociodramatic enactment’, because play offers a ‘fail-safe’ context for self-expression. Vandenberg (1998: 302) agrees: his view is that ‘playing at the real without consequences allows children to dwell within possibilities, to try them out without suffering the penalties that would otherwise accompany such actions’. In addition, Finnan (1982: 368) suggests that the freedom to do as you please within play accounts for the especially aggressive acts that often occur within its frame. She claims a player ‘can “cremate” a friend within play without fear of punishment or a sense of guilt’.

Many of these characteristics were noted in the play texts generated, and from the outset the girls showed an interest in themes related to adventure and excitement. In almost every text, the girls faced dangerous situations where they were threatened by werewolves, vampires, ghosts, aliens, zombies, and even unseen forces such as those experienced within the Bermuda Triangle. Acts such as murder, stabbings and a hanging also appeared and were at times quite violent in their enactment. The table below provides an overview of the topics played across the two stages of the research, with a strong supernatural focus being apparent across both stages and all groups. Even topics which appear from their title to be about everyday experiences, such as ‘lost in the bush’ and ‘sleepover’ all inevitably developed a supernatural dimension.

Stage one	Saturday group	Monday group	Wednesday group
Week 1	<i>The Detectives and the Alien Landing</i>	<i>A set of sleepovers: Home, treehouse, cave</i>	<i>The Magic Cupboard</i>
Week 2	<i>Haunted House</i>	<i>Space Adventure with Aliens</i>	<i>Wise Woman</i>
Week 3	<i>3x Split texts:</i> 1. <i>Lost in the bush</i> 2. <i>Pirates</i> 3. <i>Aliens</i>	<i>Bermuda Triangle Adventure</i>	<i>Congo Jungle Detective Mystery</i>

Stage one	Saturday group	Monday group	Wednesday group
Week 4	<i>Thursday Adams — the Strange Boarding School Student</i>	<i>Haunted House</i>	<i>The Green Girl</i>
Stage two		Thursday group	Friday group
		<i>Cluedo Murder Mystery</i>	<i>Kings, Queens and Traitors</i>
		<i>Haunted Hotel</i>	<i>Plane Crash</i>
		<i>Alien Invasion</i>	<i>Clothes in the Attic</i>
		<i>The Fashion Spies</i>	<i>Animal Liberationists and the Fashion Designers</i>
		<i>School Camp Cave-in</i>	<i>Strange Student</i>

These preadolescent play topics are in strong contrast with those often associated with children's play. Indeed, Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne (1984) have argued that the play of children, when left to their own devices, is seminally different from the play that emerges when children are constrained by adult intervention, with Kelly-Byrne (1989: 213) suggesting that the play she observed in her study of one eight-year-old girl was 'quite different from the wishy-washy ideas that we as adults often hold about children's play where we imagine them to be pottering about imitating domestic life and other routines'.

Thirty-five years ago, the Opies (1969) drew similar conclusions, describing the texts created by the older girls they observed during street play as regularly involving the playing out of situations of conflict, with the protagonists almost invariably being supernatural. They suggest that, in these texts, the consequences of being caught tended to be very gruesome. Likewise, within these sessions, almost every text included at least one character who had special powers — either naturally achieved or gained via the use of a specific symbolic object (such as a crystal marble, a jewelled necklace, a brooch or an item of clothing) and that battles with villainous characters were a feature. Egan (2004: 1) suggests that this interest in the 'extremes and limits of human experience' is what most readily engages the imaginations of children in the eight to fifteen age range.

This commonality of play topics across generations has led Kelly-Byrne (1989) to suggest that children draw on a common cultural repertoire of scripts in their play, but adds that this common repertoire is affected by the experiences of the players. Roopnarine and Johnson (1994: 4) also make the connection to culture and point out that children's play is 'an outcome of being a participant within a particular cultural or subcultural milieu'. The particular subcultural milieu of these girls appears to be one influenced by high levels of exposure to film and television texts that focus on the supernatural. However, it should be noted that, whilst influenced by media experiences, the play texts generated were not strongly derivative in their enactment, being spontaneously generated 'in frame' and highly original and imaginative in terms of both form and

narrative, with the shared experience of the media texts appearing to offer more support in terms of the genre of their play than the plot outline.

Of additional interest here is the fact that, although the texts generally included villainous characters with supernatural powers, the players themselves paradoxically achieved a sense of power through their play, drawn mainly from the fact that in almost every case these evil characters were able to be controlled or at least temporarily subdued via a strategy I have called the ‘Achilles Principle’ (Dunn 2001). This principle suggests that every powerful character has an inherent weakness which, when exposed, can lead to their destruction. Within one session I have labelled ‘Clothes in the Attic’, for example, a murderous cousin emerges spontaneously during the play. He has violent inclinations, but these are only present when he is wearing his black leather jacket. Once this is removed, he is weak and able to be controlled. In another text, a zombie-like alien on the loose aboard a space flight is able to be halted immediately by shining a light into its eyes, while other villains were subdued by the ringing of bells or the playing of specific tunes upon a musical instrument. In each of these texts, the tension of the play was driven by the urgent need to find a way to control the villains.

Egan (1991: 66), addresses this aspect of the imagination of children when he suggests that the powerlessness pre- and early adolescents experience in their daily lives can be overcome when they ‘identify with those human qualities best able to transcend the threats of the everyday world, qualities frequently embodied by a hero or heroine’. In this case — and possibly because of the limited number of heroines available for them within popular culture — the girls chose to adopt roles of average girls and women who were nonetheless able to control the power of a dominant character by using everyday means.

Again, although clearly influenced by characters such as Superman (kryptonite), Captain Planet (pollution) and Dracula (holy water and crucifixes), these villains and their associated ‘Achilles’ were rarely derivative and, while the principle was copied, the individual characters, their powers and associated weaknesses were not. Indeed, over the duration of this project, the complexity of these characters grew.

Also evident in this second stage, and connected to the discussion above, was the increased sophistication and level of imagination used by the players in their selection of symbols. Warnock (cited in Gallas 2001: 6) has emphasised the importance of imagination to the process of treating ‘the objects of perception as symbolising or suggesting things other than themselves’, and the rich application of symbols within the play of these preadolescent girls was, for me, a clear indication that their imaginations were working extremely hard as they played.

What did they see? ‘Realness’, engagement and visualisations

In exploring the question of what the players ‘saw’ as they played, a connection between engagement within the play texts, the visualisations experienced and the girls’ previously discussed desire for ‘realness’ was noted. In this section, the relationships amongst these three aspects will be discussed, with excerpts from the video-stimulated recall interviews being used to highlight key points.

My initial expectation in using this approach was that I would gain valuable insights into play, but I had no idea when I began just how important these would be in terms of understanding the power of the imagination. Karen’s immediate response was typical:

When you look at it now, it doesn't seem like how we saw it through our eyes when we were actually doing it, because then we thought it looked like an actual castle, but when you look at the video, it just looks like the school hall with a couple of chairs turned over.

Her comments, and those of almost all other players, suggest that the video footage was disappointing because it revealed the 'actuality' of their play and destroyed the illusions which their imaginations had so carefully crafted and their collaborative play had made possible.

However, strong visualisations were not always present for all players, and the following transcript from a group interview relating to a text known as 'The Plane Crash' is a useful reminder of how individual this process is:

JULIE: So when you are actually playing, does it feel like you are really there?

HANNAH: No!

OTHERS: Yeah. It does!

JULIE: So what do you see? Do you see, for example, the plane or the hall?

SARAH and

ANGELA: I see the plane.

HANNAH: I see the hall.

ANGELA: Like, when we were doing that boat thing to escape and we had those blankets over our heads to hide from the kidnapper, I could imagine that was real — that I saw that.

HANNAH: You couldn't see anything, you had a blanket over your head!

GILLIAN: I saw the water and the plane and stuff.

We see here that, while Gillian, Angela, Sarah and the others claim that they were able to visualise themselves as operating within the dramatic world, Hannah's experience of the same play text seems to suggest that she remained mostly within the actual one. This contrast is significant and suggests that there must be a number of factors that cause these individual differences. My field notes recorded at the conclusion of the session are useful for this discussion, as I note that within this particular text Hannah's level of engagement appeared low and describe her role-playing as comical and playful in approach. I note:

Hannah seemed quite disengaged today. She used a fake accent and waved her arms around a good deal. She was quite flippant and seemed to be only interested in trying on costumes, and being funny. Towards the end of the session, she was much more a group member and far more willing to go along with group decisions than she was at the outset of the day, but she just didn't appear to be 'in frame'.

Hannah's own comments in the interview above about her failure to visualise the dramatic context, coupled with these field notes about her apparently low levels of engagement, would seem to suggest that one of the factors that impact on the imagination is the use of humour within dramatic play, and that the adoption of comic roles prevents participants from fully engaging their visual imaginations. However, the dramatic play and comments of another group member, Donna, confuse this overly neat conclusion. Like Hannah, Donna was a player who used a highly

comical style in her play and her participation in the ‘Plane Crash’ text was no different, for here she adopted as her character a teacher who dies in the crash and is miraculously transformed into a mermaid. Her choice of this character was problematic for the group from the outset, and caused an early breakdown in the play due to the fact that the other girls found her character choice difficult to accommodate within the text. In spite of this, Donna’s response to the viewing of the video suggests that, in spite of her somewhat ridiculous choice of role, she was in fact strongly engaged and experiencing strong visualisations. Donna says: ‘That felt so real with us all huddled together ... that was really weird it felt so real ... almost too real.’

The question arises, then, of how such an unrealistic and humorous character can be adopted while the player still achieves a strong sense of ‘realness’. The answer appears to be associated with the idea that players are capable of maintaining two quite distinct and different illusions as they play — shared illusions and private illusions (Dunn 2002). These two concepts can best be explained by examining Donna’s mermaid character within the context of the ‘Plane Crash’ text. This character made conserving the shared illusion of the plane crash difficult for the other players, as the girls simply couldn’t accommodate the existence of a teacher turned mermaid within the shared dramatic world they were creating. For Donna, however, *her* ability to think *in* the fiction was clearly not disturbed by her character choice and, in spite of her outwardly comic style, she was actually strongly engaged in the action. This suggests that the private illusion of the ‘realness’ of her role was more important for her engagement than the shared illusion being generated by the group.

Significantly, the humour of her play was not of the metaplay variety, where players ‘play with the frames of play’ (Sutton-Smith 1997), but rather was a humour inherent within her character. In this way, the frames of her private illusion may not have been disturbed, but her choice of a character *did* have an effect on the shared illusion of the group, suggesting that private dramatic worlds may be more robust and important for play than shared ones.

The connection between playfulness, humour and engagement within play has been explored by a number of authors, with Smilansky and Shefatya’s (1990) contention being that children momentarily step out of character to deliver a humorous line. This view may now need to be challenged, however, for Donna’s strong visualisations suggest that humour does not necessarily reduce engagement. Perhaps it is only when meta-play is the approach adopted that this stepping-out is required.

Laurel (1991: 115) suggests that ‘engagement is what happens when we are able to give ourselves over to representational action, comfortably and unambiguously’ — a view that implies that part of the process of engagement is the ability to do what Courtney (1990: 37) describes as ‘living within the fiction’. His view is that when we are strongly engaged during a theatre or play event — or, indeed, when reading a good novel — we do not contemplate the dramatic world from outside it, but rather take the dramatic world to be actual. He believes that it is only when we begin to think *about* the fiction rather than be *in* the fiction that this ‘living within’ ends. For Laurel too (1991), engagement is only possible when the representational system we are working within can be trusted — a system that I suggest keeps us thinking *in* and not *about* the dramatic context. Low levels of engagement and a lack of visualisations and ‘realness’ may therefore be a consequence of spending too much time thinking about dramatic worlds rather than being in them, and Donna’s mermaid teacher may have forced her co-players to think *about* this character rather than be *in* the action.

Karen and Kate offer additional insights into the connection between engagement, visualisations and ‘realness’. Karen, for example, talks about ‘moments’ of realness and describes an experience when she was ‘getting flashes on and off of the actual stone walls of the cave’ and another when she could ‘see’ that she was on camp and actually walking in the dark across to the camp toilets. She suggests that these moments of realness are dependent upon your level of involvement in a text, claiming that ‘if you are in the middle of it, it feels more real’. Kate makes a similar suggestion:

When you’re not involved at all, and you are just sitting there, then you just see the school hall, but when you are saying something, or you’re playing or playing around or something, you think it is a haunted house then.

Participation levels therefore appear to have an impact upon the imagination, and it seems that the players who were constantly involved and generating text had the best chance of creating strong visualisations. Karen’s description of what she saw within a text about space travel and aliens is particularly rich. She claims that she ‘saw everything as silver ...’, and goes on to describe the scene in more detail saying: ‘I didn’t see chairs or anything, I just saw silver poles ... and finally when we had to take it all down, I thought to myself, oh yeah, they were only desks and chairs ...’

In addition to the level of involvement, cooperation at a group level also appears to influence a player’s capacity to visualise within play. Sarah, for example, claims that her ability to ‘see’ the dramatic world is affected by the other players and their ability to maintain the illusion. Her individual interview suggests that group cooperation is required, and cites an out-of-role outburst by one of the players as a moment when she definitely became aware of the hall, bringing her out of the dramatic world and into the actuality of the school context.

Indeed, out-of-role negotiations of the text were not welcome amongst these players, as they had the effect of revealing the play frame and destroying the carefully constructed shared illusion. Sawyer (2002) has suggested that more coherent narratives might be created in play if players took the opportunity to step out of character and, for example, use a narrator’s voice to move the action forward. This suggestion would clearly not have been tolerated within these sessions, however, as overt negotiations not only reduced the ‘realness’ of the text being developed but, based on Sarah’s experience, caused a loss of visualisation.

For some players, the process of generating visualisations appears to have been a very active process, requiring the determination of the individual to make them happen. Tanya, for example, outlines the active nature of this process:

JULIE: When you look around as you play, what do you see? Do you see it as the school hall, or as the attic or cave? What do you see?

TANYA: I try and see what we’re trying to make seem real.

JULIE: So does that work all of the time or only some of the time?

TANYA: Only some of the time — it depends on the atmosphere. When you have just heaps of chairs or something, it kind of doesn’t seem like it’s real, because they are just chairs ... but if there is more space, then you have like room to ...

- JULIE: In the attic one though you had very clear areas ... like the stage was the attic. Does that help?*
- TANYA: Yeah, heaps. I can imagine old walls with brown paper peeling off them in the attic.*
- JULIE: So you were trying to imagine that while it was happening?*
- TANYA: Yeah.*

Across these texts, then, players operated in a range of ways to activate their imaginations. Some used costumes, some set the scene, while others just focused on staying ‘in frame’ and involved.

Conclusion

This paper has provided detail to extend and enhance current understandings about the role of imagination in dramatic play through discussion relating to the play of one group of preadolescent girls. In particular, it has focused upon why these older children were driven to play and what they were interested in playing, and examined the link between engagement, visualisations and the experience of ‘realness’.

In terms of what drove the play, the connected notions of fun, danger and a search for ‘realness’ have been introduced. It seems that, together, these three forces drove the participation, influencing not only the contexts for play, but also structural aspects such as the preferred forms of signalling. By actively working to ensure that the play frame was not acknowledged and the illusion conserved, the girls may have been unconsciously experimenting with aesthetic distancing, building texts that allowed them to get up close to situations and supernatural forces which would be far too frightening to contemplate in real life. The findings presented here also support the existing literature in terms of play topics, with these girls choosing to explore similarly violent and aggressive contexts to those previously noted by researchers interested in older children’s play.

Most significantly, however, this paper has examined what children ‘see’ as they play, and has used the notion of private and shared dramatic worlds to suggest that engagement of the imagination and the generation of visualisations is dependent upon a range of factors and that the external appearance of engagement is not an overly useful means of identifying which participants are ‘living through’ the drama and which ones aren’t. Players need to use their imaginations to simultaneously create and conserve both private and shared illusions in order to ‘see’ the dramatic world in their mind’s eye, and their ability to do this is directly influenced by the actions of their co-players, the topic, the role they have chosen for themselves, and even their level of participation in the text. The girls’ responses to the video tapes, and the fact that the footage they saw was so different from the images their imaginations had provided for them as they played, suggests that many of them were highly successful in this process of developing visualisations.

In this research context, when offered the opportunity to generate child-structured play, these preadolescent girls appear to have achieved Greene’s (1995) goal of releasing their imaginations. However, Spencer (2003: 3) warns us that ‘imagination shrivels and shrinks if it is not nourished by the negotiations that occur between different dimensions of reality’, and while dramatic play is clearly one means of offering this nourishment, it is not a form easily accessed by preadolescent children. In view of this, drama educators should possibly be encouraged to think more about the

opportunities that are provided within structured drama activities for releasing the imagination with greater consideration given to the development of both private and shared dramatic worlds.

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